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ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER AT THE NEW YORK, N. Y., POST OFFICE.

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PUBLISHED EVERY
WEDNESDAY.

BEADLE AND ADAMS, Publishers,
92 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

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Vol. LXXVI.



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"HALLO! HALLO!" GREETED THE SPORT. TREMBLING LIKE ONE SORELY SHAKEN, THE OPERATOR LOOKED UP.

Shadrach, the Sport Detective;

OR.

THE SECRET SEVEN.

A TALE OF GYPSY CUNNING.

BY JOHN W. OSBON,
AUTHOR OF "SPORT FROM ST. LOUIS," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

DARIUS COLLINS'S FATE.

"Hallo! A shot, and—yes, that is a cry of pain and distress, or my ears have lost their cunning!"

"Steady, now, good horse! There is trouble ahead—maybe danger!"

Quieting his startled steed, Shadrach Mason slipped from the saddle and hastily tethered the animal to an oak beside the trail; then, weapon in hand, he pushed silently through the undergrowth shutting from view the scene of the tragedy.

For tragedy it surely was. True to the quick-witted sport's surmise, nothing less had been heralded by that shot and plaintive cry. Flat on his back in the middle of the rough road lay the victim of that deadly assault—a bearded, stoutly-built man of middle age, evidently an Englishman; and, as he peered out from that leafy covert, Shadrach fancied he could detect the life-current ebbing through a ragged hole in the Briton's broad, convulsively heaving chest.

"He sure caught it, and is going fast, poor fellow! And the imp that did it—where is he? Hark!—hoof-strokes! They should say the way is clear, now; but—caution, old man! Let yon lump of clay be a warning!"

Cautiously Shadrach parted the bushes and stepped out into the trail. A moment his piercing, hazel eyes swept the surrounding coverts; then, with quick, restless strides, the sport approached the prostrate Briton.

"What cheer, pardner?" he asked, dropping upon one knee and flashing a searching glance, first at that waxen face, then at the telltale marks cutting the earth here and there. "Are you only winged, or is it really bad?"

The dying man opened his eyes, shuddered, and recoiled.

"Damon! Away with you!" he exclaimed, with angry vehemence. "Why should you remain to taunt me? Is not your crime black enough?"

Gravely, the sport bent lower in an attempt to read the truth; then, with long forefinger upon the edge of that gaping wound, in a kindly but steady voice he replied:

"Black enough for you, Johnny Bull—surely! But who did it? Not I, man—don't you think it! Rally your wits just once, and speak out before your glimpse o' grace expires. Say it, now—who shot you?"

"You—you are sure you—didn't, then?"

"As gospel, Johnny! Why should you think it?"

The Englishman groaned, and feebly pointed to the sport's slouched hat, frilled shirt, and flowing sash.

Shadrach's firm lips curled in grim contempt. He nodded curtly.

"And why shouldn't I wear 'em, Johnny?" he demanded. "Surely they are not a badge of dishonor or servitude! Then, too, they suit me, for I am a sport—no more, no less! But you are new to the West, I reckon?"

"Yes, yes. Let it pass. You say you didn't—shoot, then?"

"Honor bright! I've not pressed trigger the whole day!"

"I believe you, sir. Now, do you know when I opened my eyes and saw you I jumped to the conclusion that you were a hired assassin?"

"A far-from-safe jump, Mr. Bull, I assure you!"

The Englishman smiled faintly. Then,

with an effort, he raised himself upon an elbow and stared curiously at the dark, resolute face of the sport.

"Shall I trust you?" he asked, after a moment.

"My poor fellow, it is your age! Do as you please. I am not seeking your confidence, nor shall I betray it if given."

"That will do! I am a reader of faces. I like yours. I will speak, and freely, Mr.—"

"Shadrach Mason, sir."

"I am Darius Collins, Mr. Mason, and your surmise that I am from England is correct. I came to America upon a secret mission, and I am dying with that mission unperformed."

"But I have some important papers and notes relating thereto, and I will place them in your hands for delivery to Sandy McGowan, my colleague at Crystal City, if—if you will consent—"

"I am going direct to Crystal City, and shall be glad to do you the service, Mr. Collins," the sport assured.

"Thank you, Mason. Here—the papers are done up in a thin packet, and are in my coat pocket. Get them out, will you?"

Deftly throwing open the wounded man's coat, Shadrach thrust his hand inside.

Instantly a peculiar expression crossed his face.

"Your pocket is turned inside out! The papers are gone!" he exclaimed.

A wild look flashed from Darius Collins's blue eyes, and his heavy jaws closed with a snap.

"I have been robbed!" he grated.

"You have, sir."

"See if my other pockets have been tampered with."

"They have not, sir," declared the sport. "Here is your wallet and your watch."

Collins stared vacantly at the articles. His brain seemed busy with a perplexing problem. Presently he spoke:

"Dying, Mason, am I not?"

"You are, sir," gravely.

"You will do me a favor?"

"Assuredly, sir."

"Go, then, as soon as I am dead, to Crystal City, and find McGowan. Tell him my fate, and say that I fell victim to Donald Craigie."

"Donald Craigie?"

"So I said, sir. Do you know him?" and the moribund's lips curled grimly.

Shadrach shook his head in a puzzled way.

"No," he replied. "The name is unusual, though there is something—"

"True—true! But it is enough that you do not know him," interrupted Darius Collins, testily. "Time is short. Let be that he belongs across the water, but has been in America a number of years. He is generally supposed to be the master of Craglands, in Scotland, but is a black sheep—a very black sheep. My blood is upon his head!"

"He fired the shot, then?"

"I don't say that! But if his hand did not hold the weapon, he at least inspired the attack."

"An enemy of yours, may I ask?"

"Yes. The papers I carried would have wrested from him a rich inheritance. So I suspect—Craigie!"

"Naturally. Yet you may be wrong."

"No, Mason, I feel that my condition is due to Craigie. He may have hired a tool, yet the crime lies at his door. No common footpad did the deed, or the packet alone would not have been singled out for booty!"

"Let me remind you, too, that I was shot from ambush, and fell right here. The man who lay in wait for me had a knowledge of my movements. He wanted something he believed I possessed. It was not money, for we have the wallet here, and it is not an empty one. But the packet is gone. Do you see?"

The sport nodded.

"Your theory is probably correct," he admitted. "Now, if you could have glimpsed the fellow—"

"Impossible, man! The shock deprived me of my senses, and I knew nothing till I roused, to find you bending over me. Yet, I know that Craigie was the man!"

"Urge McGowan to use every precaution, for something warns me that the false master of Craglands will do him to death."

"Say to him that the heirs are here, but known as such by Craigie, and that he must move with rare cunning and celerity if he would save them from the clutches of that masterful wretch."

"Should I fail to find McGowan—what then?"

"That is not—stay! He may even now be dead or missing! Craigie moves quickly and with marvelous precision. Should you fail to find Sandy, send word immediately to Duncan Saunders, Sansome Street, Philadelphia. And lose no time, for in thwarting the evil designs of Donald Craigie much will depend upon prompt action."

"Saunders is familiar with the case, and will know what to do. Say to him, simply, that I have been murdered, and that McGowan is dead or missing, as the case may be, and that with my last breath I charged Craigie with being at the bottom of it all."

"Say too, that the Cragland heirs are—"

A hoarse, gurgling sound broke the sentence. A crimson tide welled from the blood-flecked lips of the unfortunate Englishman. His head dropped forward; his supporting arm gave way, and before the sport could catch him he sank limply upon his back.

In another minute Darius Collins was dead.

CHAPTER II.

AJAH, THE MOUNTAIN SEER.

Shadrach Mason gazed down at the corpse of the unfortunate Englishman with a strange expression upon his fine face.

"That marks the end of a long trail," he said to himself. "The end is shrouded in gloom and mystery, too!"

"Who is Donald Craigie? What was the case that lured poor Collins across the ocean, to meet his doom in these Western wilds? Will these things ever be known? Will the murderer ever feel the avenging hand of justice?"

"I can but keep my pledge, and seek out McGowan. Then—time will tell!"

A careful search of the Englishman's pockets brought nothing new to light, and after a moment's reflection the sport lifted the body in his arms, entered the shrubbery, and placed it at the foot of a tree. Crossing the hands over that broad chest, he turned away, musing:

"It's the best I can do, just now. I'll get a look at the point of ambush, and hurry on to Crystal City. McGowan will finish the job."

Retracing his steps, then, to the point at which Collins had fallen, Shadrach again bent low, to scan those telltale marks. His keen eyes flashed here and there, and he nodded shortly.

"Hardly distinct enough to swear by yet plainly never made by brogans. Foo long, rather slim, and encased in boot o' shoe finer than the average. It is no poor Collins's imprint, surely, for his soles are broad and flat. Now—"

Ending the thought abruptly, Shadrach Mason gently parted the bushes and peered within the lair from which the assassin had fired that dastardly shot. The broken and twisted twigs of the shrubbery and the trampled earth marked the place beyond question, and hinted strongly that the deadly vigil had been of such duration as to beget both impatience and physical discomfort.

Keenly and quickly the sport read the signs.

Then, passing beyond that natural screen, Shadrach crouched in the assassin's tracks, and glanced up and down the trail.

"As foul a deed as Satan ever inspired!" he muttered. "These powder-burned leaves clearly prove that even the muzzle of the murderer's weapon was hidden from view, so that poor Collins walked straight into the death-trap without sight or sound to warn him of his impending doom!"

"Well, I shall do my best to aid McGowan in avenging his pard, so must overlook no point that could be of value in tracing down the author of the crime."

"There is yet time before sunset to trail the assassin to the point where he left his horse, and I will do it, so that no possible clue may be missed."

The trail was certainly plain enough to be easily followed, for no attempt at concealment had been made. Yet Shadrach moved forward in a slow and deliberate manner, pausing anon to study the peculiarities of the footprints, where the soil was sufficiently barren to show a clear impression.

Not until he had reached the point at which the assassin's horse had been kept in waiting was his patience rewarded.

There the earth was trampled and cut, and all signs went to show that the animal, like his master, had grown impatient at the delay.

A glance disclosed as much, and then a sharp ejaculation burst from the lips of the sport.

Right in the center of that space of barren earth lay a round, yellow object, gleaming softly in the glancing rays of the sun.

Carefully noting the position in which it lay, Shadrach reached forward and seized the bit of metal.

It was a gold locket. The sides were smooth and timeworn, and the fragment of slender, plain gold chain attached had worn away to the merest filament.

For a moment the sport gazed curiously at the trinket.

"An heirloom, and a clue. When the man who lost this locket is found, the search for Darius Collins's murderer will end."

So saying, he sprung the lid of the locket, revealing in miniature the face of a young and beautiful girl. Long and earnestly he studied the features of that tiny likeness, then closed the lid and slipped the locket into his purse.

With a glance up and down the trail, Shadrach quickly bent to the hoof-prints leading away from that trampled spot, and again was his patience rewarded by a discovery.

The shoe on the left hind foot of the assassin's horse was marked in a peculiar manner.

Three deep nicks had been filed in the edge of the tough metal, and wherever the soil was moist enough to receive and retain the full impression, those telltale marks appeared!

The sport smiled grimly, and hurried toward his horse.

"McGowan cannot complain of a lack of clues!" he told himself. "If the assassin is in Crystal City twenty-four hours should see him safely caged."

Untying his horse, Shadrach vaulted into the saddle and resumed his journey.

Considerable time had been consumed in his investigations, and a glance at the declining sun convinced him that he could by no possibility reach his destination until two or three hours after nightfall.

Then, too, as he spurred onward that stretch of level woodland gave way to masses of broken, barren rock, which, in turn, were supplanted by towering hills and crags, and the sport shook his head ominously, muttering:

"The trail certainly bids fair to sustain its reputation. Here's hoping I'll not encounter any of the lawless bands said to infest these fastnesses. If I do—"

A short nod succeeded the hiatus, and he examined the brace of heavy revolvers in his saddle holsters, with manifest satisfaction.

Then the sun sank beyond the distant peaks, and when the brief twilight deep-

ened into darkness Shadrach Mason gave his horse free rein.

Nearly two hours had passed thus, when the animal shied suddenly, stopped, and uttered a loud snort of alarm.

At the same instant a faint glow of light appeared on the face of a towering wall of rock just ahead, in an angle of the trail—a pale, nimbuslike glow, which quickly deepened into a circle of vivid flame, surrounding a huge black hand, armed with a long sword!

Iron-nerved though he was, the sport was slightly startled by the appearance of that apparition, and for a brief space stared at it in undisguised amazement. But he was quick to rally, and in a stern voice exclaimed:

"By heavens! it is a cunning game of the Trail Robbers; but they shall find that in one case, at least, it fails of the purpose intended!"

"Forward, good horse! This juggler's trick must not hold us back!"

In a twinkling he slipped a revolver from the holster, bent low in the saddle, and struck spurs to his horse.

But the animal obstinately refused to move.

"Hold, sir! Do not attempt to flee, for death awaits you in the trail beyond!" uttered a sepulchral voice, and the bowed form of an old man appeared on the verge of the bluff, just above that huge nimbus of light.

"No harm shall befall you here, but you must listen to what I say, and heed well, or pay forfeit with your life!"

Coolly the sport gazed at the speaker a moment, then in a fearless tone demanded:

"Who are you?"

Instantly came the answer:

"I am Ajah, the Mountain Seer, and I am here to warn you of danger and death!"

CHAPTER III.

THE SPORT AND THE SEER.

A brief silence followed that announcement. Then a moment's reflection convinced the sport that he was very likely dealing with a madman, and he promptly determined to meet cunning with cunning.

Scarcely was that conclusion formed, however, when a scornful laugh rang through the darkness, and Ajah spoke again, saying:

"Out upon you, trifter! You deceive yourself. My brain is so clear, my mental perception so keen, that I can read your every thought at will!"

"You told yourself just now that you were beset by the Trail Robbers; then that you were dealing with a lunatic, and must meet craft with craft. Is it not so?"

"Oh, yes! You have called the turn," the sport admitted, dryly. "But speak your little piece, please, and permit me to get on toward Crystal City. I have an important matter in hand."

"You refer to the murder of Darius Collins?"

"I do."

"You would better forget that affair as quickly as possible."

"Why?"

"In keeping your pledge you will bring an innocent man to the gallows!"

The hollow voice of the old man had taken on a firmer tone, and Shadrach fancied he could detect an anxious note. With interest freshly aroused, he smiled grimly, and quickly asked:

"Meaning Donald Craigie, I believe?"

Ajah seemed staggered by that abrupt question. Then he conquered his hesitancy, and replied:

"My lips are sealed. I can neither affirm nor deny."

"But take my advice and drop the matter. No good can come of it."

"I presume not—for the assassin! McGowan will certainly spare no effort to arrest and convict him."

"On the contrary, McGowan will never lift a finger to punish the guilty party!" asseverated Ajah, impressively.

"Surely, yes! He was the dead man's pard."

"No matter. You will find that I am right. Then, too, there is another and more important consideration which should deter you from further action."

"Name it."

"You will endanger your life."

The sport laughed outright.

"Well, I shall try to defend myself," he assured. "A bluff like that won't work, Mr. Prophet. But let's stop this chin music and get down to business. I've been thinking a bit, and I've decided you're not playing this little game for the good of my health alone. You have an object in view, and it strikes me it is high time for you to show your hand."

"That is true," Ajah assented. "In fact, I had a double object in planning this hold-up. First, I desired to warn you that a number of Captain Karl's Trail Robbers are in ambush a mile ahead, awaiting you. To avoid them, turn to the left just beyond this angle. The trail forks there, and the south branch leads away to Gilt Edge. From that camp it is only four miles to Crystal City."

"I thank you," the sport declared, impressed by the old man's intense earnestness. "I will remember the favor."

"Yes. Then, sir, I wanted to request you to yield the locket you picked up this afternoon."

Shadrach started.

"Is it yours?" he asked.

"I prefer not to answer that question. It was stolen and placed there to criminate the owner."

"You surprise me! Are you sure of that?"

"I am positive."

"How did you know I had found such a locket?"

"I saw you pick it up."

"You were there, then?"

"I was near."

"So? My friend, I believe you are Donald Craigie!" declared the sport, abruptly.

A sharp gasp of dismay and consternation came from Ajah.

"No, no! Heaven forbid!" he exclaimed. "I have told you the truth. I am simply Ajah, the Mountain Seer."

"But you have a name?"

"I had, once; not now."

"Now, sir, do you grant my request?"

The sport shook his head decidedly.

"I cannot do it," he returned. "The man Collins was foully murdered; the locket furnishes an important clue, and as such must be delivered to the authorities."

"It will help to hang an innocent man," Ajah expostulated.

"And it may clear an innocent man," the sport shrewdly retorted.

Ajah sighed, and in a dejected tone said:

"Have your way. I will not resort to force, but trust to the goodness of God. Go your way in peace."

Then the light faded out, leaving the face of the bluff shrouded in inky gloom, and the sport felt that he was alone.

For a full minute he stared blankly toward that rocky wall. That he was puzzled was told by his words, for he muttered:

"What does it mean? What is the riddle involved in this crime? Is Ajah himself the guilty man?"

Feeling that he indeed had food for thought, Shadrach quietly touched spur to his horse and rode around the angle. Unconsciously, almost, he turned to the left, taking the Gilt Edge trail, as directed by the seer.

"Right into the jaws of a trap, as likely as not," he mused, grimly. "Somehow, though, the old fellow's words had a truthful ring, and I believe he spoke by the book."

For more than an hour the sport rode steadily onward, keenly alert. Then, a turn in the road brought a number of twinkling lights into view, announcing that Gilt Edge lay just ahead.

Arrived at the camp, Shadrach halted and inquired about the Crystal City trail. Possessed of the desired information, he departed at once, and reached his destination shortly before midnight.

Crystal City was a bustling little railroad town, the terminus of a short line, or "spur," running right into the heart of the mining region; and as the sport cantered briskly through the principal street, he noted with no little satisfaction that many places were yet open.

"I can get this Collins matter off my hands at once, and be free to attend to my own affairs," he assured himself. "It is an ugly business. I don't like it."

Drawing rein in front of a hotel, the sport dismounted, hitched his horse to the rack, and entered the office, a small room in a corner of the building.

A number of men were there, lounging about and talking, but a hush came over the group as the sport crossed the threshold, paused, and glanced around the little room.

A remarkable-looking personage he was, assuredly. Not over thirty, tall, broad-shouldered, and of athletic mold, with a face handsome, though dark and stern, he was one to attract attention and command respect.

A gray sombrero was in striking contrast to his crisply curling black hair and mustache, while the short gray jacket, ornate with double rows of big gold buttons, was in artistic keeping with the broad maroon silk sash girdling his trim waist. Snug-fitting trousers of gray velveteen and high-topped patent-leather boots completed his attire, and his picturesque garb certainly set off his fine figure to splendid advantage.

His dark eyes swept the room, then singled out the landlord, and with a crisp nod he moved toward the open register.

Mine Host Wilhelm Scharlau, of the Miners' Delight, stepped quickly forward. In a moment the name of Shadrach Mason appeared upon the register, and the landlord held in his hand the pay for a week's accommodation for man and beast.

Then the sport spoke:

"I am looking for a man named Sandy McGowan. Can you tell me where I may find him, landlord?"

The Teuton's heavy face twitched spasmodically, and his dull blue eyes opened widely.

"Mein Gott! Yes!" he cried, explosively. "Der man vas deat!"

CHAPTER IV. IN CRYSTAL CITY.

Just a breath of silence followed Scharlau's terse announcement that McGowan was dead; then one of the loungers, evidently a miner, quickly added:

"Yas; Sandy wuz run down by a train, over yender by the station, jest after dark."

"The body wuz toted into Orthodox Willum's coffin j'int, an' ef so be as ye'd like to gaze upon it, I'll steer ye acrost."

"Yaw! Dot vos so," nodded the landlord. "Pill Daylor gan do dot, kevick, und der drip gots you not'ings at all."

"Thank you, gentlemen—not to-night," the sport returned, politely.

"Was the death due to an accident, Mr. Taylor?"

"Oh, yas, pard sport. Sandy hed packed his grip an' wuz slidin' out fer the East, but wuz a couple o' minutes late, an' tried to jump on the movin' train."

"He wuz foolish, o' course; but it seems like sech things will happen, jest to 'mind us thet in ther midst o' life we are in death, as the sky pilot putts it."

"You saw the accident, I presume, Mr. Taylor?"

"Oh, no; the Telegraph Sharp at the station wuz the only one who glimpsed it, an' he gave the alarm."

"But I say, pard sport, don't 'mister' me. I'm plain Bill Taylor—Miner Bill the boys calls me, fer ye see thar's four

other Bills o' my name in this town, an' we gets all mixed up.

"One o' these gents is Whisky Bill, a bar-keep' over at the Mecca; another is Bunco Bill, a tin-horn sport who hangs out thar. The third is an Englishman, a sort of low-down cuss, a reg'lar dude, an' we calls him British Bill."

"Thet was the full list up to ten days ago, when a redskin sport sneaked into town one night an' tacked his mark square astraddle of my good white man's name. We thought Pawnee Bill would fit his case, an' Pawnee Bill he is."

With careless attitude Shadrach listened to Miner Bill's request and explanation; but a close observer would have noticed an expressive gleam in his dark eyes.

"Quite a mix-up, Miner Bill, I should say," he remarked, pleasantly.

"But I am deeply interested in McGowan's death, and would like to hear the operator's story. Will you point out the way to the station?"

"Straight as the crow flies down the street, pard, an' ye can't miss it."

Nodding his thanks, the sport left the office and strode rapidly in the direction indicated.

"Another twist in the puzzle," he thought, as he hurried along. "Was McGowan's death due to accident, or was he, too, murdered?"

Then he recalled the words of the seer, and his dark brow gathered in an ominous frown.

"Is Ajah's hand indeed the guilty one? Surely, he could have slain Collins; but McGowan—no; if murder, another struck that blow! Yet, the old man's words would point to a guilty knowledge of the deed."

"It's certainly a wit-twister for the law-sharps. I'll telegraph Duncan Saunders, notify the marshal, and wash my hands of the entire affair as quickly as possible."

Just as he formed that conclusion Shadrach reached the depot, a small frame building, within a half-dozen paces of the railroad tracks.

A light shone through the window and the open door, and a glance discovered the operator seated before his instruments, with face buried in hands.

"Hallo! hallo! All alone, I see," greeted the sport, as he stepped into the room.

"Am I too late to send a message?"

Starting and trembling like one sorely shaken, the operator looked up. His face was haggard and his blue eyes were aglow with mingled terror and defiance.

At sight of the sport's stern, dark face, however, he slowly rose, and replied:

"You can send a night message—yes, sir. The 10:30 train is two hours late, or the office would be closed. Take the chair, sir, and use my table. You will find pen and paper at hand. My nerves are all unstrung to-night, and I will walk about a bit while you prepare the message."

Shadrach smiled and nodded, and sat down.

"You do look badly used up," he remarked, bending a keen look on the operator's face. "They tell me a man was killed here to-night. I suppose that has shaken your nerves."

"Yes. It was a terrible thing. He wanted the outgoing train, but was late, and tried to get aboard as it was moving out. I called to him not to attempt it, but he kept on. He caught the railing of a coach, but lost his footing, and was swept under the wheels."

The operator shuddered violently, and again grew white.

"Don't brood over it, man," the sport advised, in a kindly tone. "Get it off your mind."

Then he seized pen and paper, and in a free, bold hand wrote:

"Crystal City, Mont., June 10, 189—. Duncan Saunders,

Sansome Street, Philadelphia:

Darius Collins was murdered to-day, twenty miles east of this place. Before

dying he charged Donald Craigie with the crime. Particulars by mail.

Sandy McGowan killed by train here to-night. SHADRACH MASON,

Miners' Delight Hotel."

"There! You may put that on the wire," the sport exclaimed, laying down the pen and rising. "Send it collect, but have it repeated, to make sure there is no mistake. Here is a five to guarantee that all charges will be paid."

Thus speaking, he drew a bank bill from his purse and placed it upon the freshly written message, then turned and strode out into the street.

"That's one trick turned," he reflected. "Now, if I can find the marshal, I'll turn over the evidence and have done with the case, for this business isn't to my liking."

"If I'm not mistaken, that is Orthodox William's coffin-shop on yonder corner, and I reckon I may strike the marshal's trail right there."

Wearily, then, the sport laid his course toward that distant, coffin-shaped transparency which had caught his eye, and a few minutes later pushed open the door and entered the undertaking establishment.

A tall, thin man, with black hair, bulging brows, deep-set, gloomy black eyes, and cadaverous face, stopped in the middle of a sentence and turned from his companion, a short, thick-set old fellow, to shamble hurriedly toward the door.

"How do you do, sir?" he saluted, favoring Shadrach with a suspicious glance and a curt nod. "What can I do for you?"

The sombre appearance of the man, coupled with his whining, disagreeable voice and suspicious air, instantly prejudiced the sport; but he smiled blandly and responded:

"You are Orthodox William, I believe, sir?"

"So called by the ungodly scamps of this town—yes, sir. However, the name bestowed upon me at the baptismal font was William Weeper. And I assure you, sir, that I have no reason to be ashamed of that cognomen."

Having delivered himself in this fashion, the undertaker scowled darkly, glared at the sport, and rubbed his hands.

"No, I presume not," was the complacent rejoinder. "Excuse me, Mr. Weeper, for troubling you. I merely stopped to ask where I would be likely to find the town marshal."

"You didn't know he was here, then?"

"Assuredly not."

"Well, there's the man—Thomas Tarbutton."

At this the old fellow came briskly forward. His keen, twinkling gray eyes had not been idle during that brief colloquy, and he read that the sport was bent on business.

"Right hyar, Mr. Sport, able an' willin'," he exclaimed. "Now what's up?"

Briefly, then, Shadrach Mason told his story, dwelling on each point sufficiently long to make it clear, and in conclusion handed over the locket.

Both official and undertaker stared curiously at the miniature. Then they exchanged significant glances. The former seemed chagrined, the latter triumphant. Tarbutton nodded shortly. Mr. Weeper, rubbing his hands gently, turned to the sport, and said:

"Ah—um! Very good, Mr. Mason—very good, indeed! I really beg your pardon! I didn't know—"

A ringing warwhoop, blending with the swift cracking of a revolver, interrupted that purring strain, and the undertaker shrank back in wild alarm.

Uttering a sharp, fierce cry, Shadrach jerked a weapon from the folds of his sash, flung open the door, and leaped into the street, closely followed by the bulky form of Marshal Tarbutton!

CHAPTER V.

THE THUG.

That abrupt transition from the light of the undertaker's shop to the darkness

of the street blinded the sport for the moment; but his keen ears located that deadly struggle quickly, and with remarkable certitude, and he bounded forward, brushing hand across eyes as he ran.

Then, he made out a number of struggling figures at the corner of a narrow street, or alley, and in another half-minute he joined in the fray, swinging clubbed revolver right and left with terrific force.

"Break loose, you masked dogs!" he grated, fiercely, forcing his way to a position fairly astride the prostrate form over which that evil cohort was hovering, coyotelike. "Off, I say, or—"

"Down the whelp, pard, or the game is both won and lost!" cut in a hoarse voice. "Quick, too, for the whole town is alarmed!"

Silently, the masked figures, five in all, flung themselves forward, in response to that command, only to recoil in dismay! With a dexterous movement Shadrach had drawn a second revolver, and now the brace of deadly steel tubes bore full upon the cohort!

"Steady!" warned the sport, quick to note and take advantage of that momentary shrinking, his dark eyes fairly luminous with hot anger. "Enough should be as good as a feast—you curs!"

Just then, with a swift patter of feet and breathing hard from his unwonted exertions, Marshal Tarbutton ranged alongside the sport, guns in hand.

"Let be! I'll 'tend—"

A furious curse and a harsh command drowned that wheezy voice, and with one accord the five masks darted away, rushing pell-mell through the narrow cross street.

But, swiftly as they moved, they could not wholly elude the sport. Leaving the marshal gasping and spluttering beside that motionless form, he bounded lightly after the nearest of the fleeing roughts, and a moment later gripped the throat of one with fingers of steel.

Thus checked in that mad flight, the fellow fought viciously, but to no purpose. His captor was directly behind him, with hands locked on his carotid and a knee planted firmly in the small of his back, and he quickly realized the utter futility of further resistance.

"Hold up your hands," ordered Shadrach, sternly, as the fellow's struggles ceased. "Don't try any tricks. You're due for a dose of rope or lead, and you'll get it a bit quicker than the law allows if you play monkey!"

"Don't! I'll never—"

There the faltering voice failed, for that relentless clutch had paralyzed the rascal's larynx for the moment, and the frantic appeal ended with a hollow, sobbing sound.

Shadrach nodded grimly, then with hand clenched in collar, swung his captive squarely around, and briskly marched him back to the scene of the struggle.

The sturdy old marshal, with pistol-armed hands, was holding back the curious group that had quickly gathered, and he hailed the sport's return with outspoken relief.

A few words from the sport made matters sufficiently clear for the time being. Then Tarbutton took charge of the prisoner, whereupon Shadrach lifted that motionless form in his sinewy arms, and hastily followed the marshal and the captive toward the undertaker's, while a number of the idlers straggled along in the rear.

In response to a peremptory summons from Tarbutton, Weeper cautiously opened the door and admitted them, then turned the key in the lock, to shut out the idle followers.

"Pull down yer shade, too," the marshal ordered, with a jerk of his thumb at the single window in the front of the narrow little shop. "I'm goin' to take the rag off this critter's face, by an' by, an' ef his friends are in that gang out thar, it may head off a ruction."

Orthodox obeyed without question, but

in an extremely nervous manner, while Tarbutton caught up a bit of rope and deftly knotted it around the wrists and ankles of his captive.

Meanwhile, Shadrach was not idle. On entering the place, he had quickly placed his senseless burden on a long work-bench at one side of the room, and at once began a search for the wounds inducing that deathlike stupor.

In this task, he was shortly joined by Tarbutton.

At sight of that senseless face, the old officer uttered an oath of surprise.

"It's the quarter-blood, Pawnee Bill!" he exclaimed. "Say, the cuss has been flush o' coin, an' I reckon that gang were after the ding-bats."

"I suppose so. We'll let it go at that for the present," the sport responded, drawing back from that sinewy, gayly-garbed form with a long breath of relief.

"He's lost no blood, at any rate. A clip over the head with some blunt instrument did the business, and I think a douche of cold water will bring him around."

The marshal assented to this view, and a moment later the remedy was successfully applied. Pawnee Bill sat up in a dazed way, then glanced slowly around until his dark eyes encountered the masked captive.

Then he started violently, swung himself clear of the bench, and started forward, but was quickly stopped by the officer.

"Hold on! hold on!" the latter exclaimed. "Ye can't do any funny business, Pawnee! I've got the critter, an' that's enough."

A grim look crossed the quarter-blood's face.

"You do not understand," he returned, quietly, and in excellent English. "I do not seek to harm the wretch. He is in your hands. He shall be punished as the law provides. But he is one of the men who assaulted me, and I have a right to see his face."

"That's so, redskin. You shall see it, too. But wait—tell us what ye know of the attack, first."

"Marshal, I know but little. I was passing the corner, when a number of men sprang upon me. There was just time to shout aloud and fire my revolver before they got me fast and took my weapons away. Then a blow fell upon my head, and I knew nothing more until I felt the water dashed into my face."

"You were robbed?"

"The Pawnee is not a fool, to carry gold in his pockets."

The old marshal chuckled.

"Ye did well to hide it," he remarked.

"See, your pockets are turned."

An angry flush came over Pawnee Bill's face when he found Tarbutton's assertion to be correct. Then, before further words could be exchanged, Orthodox interposed, saying petulantly:

"Come, gentlemen, I shall have to ask you to make haste. It is after midnight. You are depriving me of my rest."

"Marshal Tarbutton, can you not transfer the scene of your investigations to the town prison?"

"To be sure, Orthodox—in jest a minute. Come, boys; we'll look at ther critter's face, then go."

"It will do yer no good," spoke up the prisoner, uneasily. "I'm a stranger in Crystal City."

"Say ye are, eh?" As he uttered the incredulous words, the marshal stripped aside the mask.

Then all saw that the fellow had spoken the truth. He was, indeed, a stranger, travel-stained and dusty.

"I'm willin' to make a clean breast o' this hyar leetle trick ef ye'll promise me a square deal," he continued, glancing from one to another. "I reckon I'm in a putty tight box, eh?"

"Highway robbery," the marshal assured.

"An' thet means ther pen?"

"You bet!"

Pawnee Bill's dark eyes flashed.

"I object to any compromise," he sternly interposed. "Marshal, do your duty!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE BEAUTIFUL CAPTIVE.

The emphatic words of the Pawnee brought a dark scowl to the face of the prisoner.

Marshal Tarbutton, too, seemed a bit put out, but he quietly smothered his resentment and marched the captive away to the lock-up, followed by the half-dozen idlers who had been hanging around the door.

Then the sport bade Orthodox good-night, and departed, accompanied by Pawnee Bill.

In the street, the latter took the lead, and a moment later the two men halted in the shadow of a tree on the outskirts of the town.

"Well, captain, you are here on time," the quarter-blood exclaimed, warmly grasping the sport's hand.

"Oh, yes, Bill, and with a few hours to spare," was the quick response.

"But how goes the game? Have you made any headway?"

"Very little. The fact is, captain, the secret has leaked out, and we are forestalled in our search."

This announcement seemed fairly to startle the sport, and for a moment he was silent.

Then a thought occurred to him, and he exclaimed:

"I believe I have the solution, Bill."

"It is the Englishman himself at work, or some one who has secured his portion of the map."

"The latter surmise is likely the correct one, captain. From my father's description of the man, Yorke was a thorough gentleman. The men in the basin are ruffians. Yorke would never have employed them."

"That is true."

"Then, too, the attack upon me to-night was not without a motive. I had been seen in the basin. The chief of the ruffians suspected, perhaps knew, that a section of the map was in my possession, and planned the attack to secure it."

This view of the case seemed to impress the sport. He pondered a moment, then said:

"The prisoner can doubtless tell us something. I will see him at the calaboose to-morrow, and try to get the truth out of him."

"Do it, by all means. But do not let the marshal or Orthodox Weeper get a hint of what passes. The marshal may be honest—probably is; but the undertaker I am sure is not to be trusted."

"I had reached just that conclusion, Bill, so did not urge you to make terms with the fellow, badly as I wanted to learn the real motive for the attack and the identity of the man who caused it to be made. I will be careful."

Then the conversation drifted to other matters, and a little later the two men parted, with an agreement to meet the next day.

Much was destined to occur before that meeting should take place.

On the morning following his arrival in Crystal City, Shadrach Mason was early astir. As soon as he had breakfasted, he secured his horse and galloped swiftly out of town.

Consulting a bit of time-yellowed paper, the sport followed the Gilt Edge trail a couple of miles, then boldly rode into a dry canyon leading deeper amid the hills.

"As well try here as further on," he muttered. "It is much like searching for a needle in a haystack, after all; but this canyon seems to fit the description given in the meagre instructions my father left, and perhaps it may lead to the very place I seek."

Events tended to strengthen the hope. A few miles further on the canyon opened into an irregular, rock-walled basin, and as the picturesque vista met

his gaze Shadrach involuntarily drew rein.

"Yes, this is the place!" he exclaimed. "I am sure there can be no mistake. The hidden mine is somewhere in this hill-girt valley."

Then he started sharply, and gazed earnestly at the foot of the opposite bluffs.

Halt hidden by the timber, a campfire smoldered there, and as the sport noted the lazily curling smoke, a look of disquiet crossed his dark face.

"That means that the gold-seekers are indeed here," he muttered. "I will ride across and take a look at the outfit."

"This is the basin, surely, for that campfire proves it the same reached by Pawnee Bill. The party yonder entered, I dare say, by the route laid down on the Englishman's section of the map."

"If so, each of the three approaches has been found, and it only remains to place the three sections of the original map together to locate the mine."

"I trust that Yorke himself or his lawful representative is at the head of the party, for then the matter may be quickly and satisfactorily settled."

While thus musing, the sport had been cantering rapidly across the valley, and a moment later he entered the open timber lying along the base of the cliffs.

Then his approach was observed by those around the fire, and they stepped forward, with scowling faces.

The men were three in number. They were dressed like miners, but heavily armed, and an experienced reader of faces would at once have pronounced them rascals.

"Good-morning, men," the sport saluted, as he drew rein beside the group. "Who is the chief of your party?"

The three desperadoes looked at each other. Then the tallest of the trio stepped nearer the sport, nodded, and said:

"Our boss ain't hyar, jest now. But I'm chief o' this hyar layout when he's away. I'm Bunco Bill, an' ef ye're bent on business, jest speak yer leetle piece ter me."

"No, my man; I prefer to see your chief in person. Will he return soon?"

"Oh, ya—thet is, I mean—blamed ef I knows, pard," Bunco replied, in stammering confusion, adding, with a broad grin: "Yer'll hev' ter ast him!"

Shadrach frowned impatiently.

"Come, my man; we're not getting along very rapidly," he exclaimed. "You can tell me if your chief will return today?"

"Kin ain't will, pard!"

"You refuse, then?"

"Sartin, fer I doesn't know."

"Where shall I find him?"

"Jest whar yer meets him."

Then all three of the ruffians laughed loudly, and a wrathful gleam appeared in the hazel eyes of the sport.

"Come! come! This won't do!" he protested. "It is important that I have a talk with your chief as quickly as possible, and you must help me do it. Now, where shall I find him?"

"I don't know."

"Well, give me his name. I will hunt him up."

"Pard, yer is imperlite. Et's ag'in ther rules ter ast names in this hyar kentry."

"Among rogues it is, I know," was the significant retort.

At these words the desperado flushed angrily, and clenched his hands in a threatening manner.

"Does yer call me a rogue?" he demanded, savagely.

"I certainly believe you to be one," was the cool reply, and, slipping out of his saddle, Shadrach boldly confronted the fellow.

"Now, come on, and I'll give you a lesson you'll never forget!"

Naturally quarrelsome and pugnacious, Bunco Bill needed no urging. He looked to be fully forty pounds heavier than the sport, and he believed there was an easy victory before him.

Never was a man more deceived.

His savage rush was promptly checked with a right-hand blow straight from the shoulder, which sent him staggering backward. Then Shadrach leaped forward and repeated the stroke, and the fight was ended.

As they noted this decisive finish, Bunco Bill's companions sprang forward with cries of rage.

But the sport was on his guard. Swiftly his hands dropped to his weapons, while from his lips burst the warning:

"Stand back, both of you! Don't attempt to interfere, or I shall open fire! Understand, Bunco is my game! I've jogged his memory and loosened his tongue, and he is going to tell me all he knows!"

Before those pistol-armed hands the ruffians felt they were helpless, indeed, and both shrank back, with muttered curses.

But at that juncture there came a startling interruption.

Out from a narrow, zigzag opening in the towering wall beside the sport spurred two masked horsemen, leading a third animal, bearing a young and beautiful girl!

With a swift glance at the scene before them, both men drew rein, while from the lips of the foremost came a sharp ejaculation of surprise and anger.

Then, before a hand could be lifted to prevent it, the girl sprang from the saddle and flung herself fairly upon the sport, while from her pale and quivering lips came the wild appeal:

"Save, oh! save me, sir! for those men mean to kill me!"

CHAPTER VII.

IVAN, THE KEEPER.

Despite Pawnee Bill's emphatic refusal to open negotiations with the captured thug, Marshal Thomas Tarbutton was fully determined to do that very thing just as soon as he could get the fellow under lock and key.

Some extremely puzzling affairs had occurred in and around Crystal City during the preceding half year, and the astute old marshal was quite ready to believe that the bustling little town had become the headquarters of an organized band of lawbreakers.

"An' now 'at I've got one o' the birds, who's to say I shan't make him sing his little song?" he angrily muttered, unconsciously tightening his grip on the prisoner, as he hurried toward the calaboose. "Umph! No Injun card-sharp, fer shore!"

A moment later he passed around a corner in the street and halted before the prison, a substantial structure, built of hewed logs. A light shone through a barred window near the end of the building, and, in response to a sharp rap, the door was quickly unlocked and flung open.

The keeper, a short, stockily-built man, with bristling white beard, herculean shoulders, and long and powerful arms, stared keenly at officer and prisoner a moment; then, with a deft, catlike movement, he swung aside, saying:

"Enter, marshal, and most welcome! By my soul! but I've been lonesome, and I greet your jailbird with joy. Need I say he shall not escape?"

The voice was soft, almost purring, and broken slightly by a peculiar foreign accent. A flush dyed the dark skin beneath that grizzled beard and the shaggy brows, and the prisoner trembled as he felt the gaze of the keeper's pale, but intensely eager, eyes upon his face.

"No, Ivan," the marshal chuckled, following his captive through that narrow doorway. "No need to promise. He's shore enough to be on hand, dead or alive, when wanted, with you on guard!"

"But I want to chin the critter a bit, you understand, before giving him into your keepin'."

Ivan bowed, closed the door, and retreated to the cellroom, where he extended himself upon a rude bunk, and patiently waited.

Tarbutton at once motioned the prisoner to a seat, and sat down himself.

"Now, critter, cut loose," he exclaimed. "Let's hear about this attack on the red sport. What was you after?"

"Slowly, my friend!" the captive retorted. "You forget that my lips are sealed until I am promised freedom."

The marshal scowled darkly, and pondered a moment.

"I don't know what ye kin tell. But if your disclosures are important, I'll stand between you an' prosecution. That's all I kin promise," he growled.

"That's enough. I'll rely on you, an' speak. My name's Tom Johnson, an' as you have seen, I'm a stranger in camp. I reached hyar this mornin', clean busted, an' thet's what got me into this hyar scrape."

"It was highway robbery, then?"

"I reckon. I don't know fer shore, though. Ye see, I was hangin' 'round ther Mecca, when some one popped a note into my hand. Cain't say who it was, fer I didn't see. This note said as how ef I was a dead game man thar was a chainece fer me ter make ten dollars putty quick."

"Whar's ther note?"

The prisoner tapped his pocket, significantly, and nodded.

"I'll shore flash et, by an' by," he assured. "Of course, soon es I found what hed bin putt in my hand, I looked 'round ter see ef I could spot ther critter; but he was too deep fer my leetle game, an' I soon guv et up."

"Then I determined ter make a try at et, fer I needed ther ten, so I went out ther back door o' ther Mecca, an' whistled three times, like ther note hed said. I must do."

"Oh, they war thar, pard, an' waitin'. Ther chief o' ther layout got ther drop on me, an' then explained what he wanted ter do. Thar was a red sport in camp, he said, thet hed about cleaned him out at poker a few nights before, an' he was bent on givin' him a first-class thump-in'."

"He didn't say, then, 'at he wanted ter rob Pawnee Bill?"

"Nary a hint thet way, boss! He was out fer revenge, pure an' simple. He calculated, too, thet ther redskin 'u'd putt up a mean fight, an' he wanted men enough with him ter make a good job of it."

"Would ye know ther chief, should ye see him?"

Johnson reflected a moment, then, in a decided way, shook his head, declaring:

"No. He wore a mask, boss. They all did, an' I'd not know one o' them."

"Thar war five o' ye?"

"By count, pard."

"An' ther chief—what-fer man did he seem? Short or tall? Old or young?"

"Tallish, boss, an' cat-quick on feet, but too well covered ter see much o' him. He didn't say more'n he hed to, an' his voice was deep an' coarse. Now, boss, thet's all I knows. He cut out ther work an' I helped do et, fer I got my ten when we clinched ther bargain. Ef I was to be hanged, I c'u'dn't say more."

Again Tarbutton scowled.

"An' et's leetle enough!" he grumbled. "However, I'll stick by my words, ef yer story proves true. Ho, Ivan!"

Thus summoned, the keeper quickly appeared, and the marshal at once searched and registered the prisoner.

True to Johnson's assertions, the note and exactly ten dollars were found in his possession, and the marshal departed with a satisfied expression on his round old face.

Then Ivan carefully secured the door, and turned to the prisoner.

"Well, Johnson, you are a cunning knave," he remarked, in his peculiar way. "You have completely deceived that insensate dolt!"

The prisoner started guiltily.

"I—I don't understand you, jailer."

"Your denial is silly, Johnson. The tale you told had been carefully concocted for just such an occasion."

"You were in the cellroom. You didn't hear it."

"In the cellroom—yes; but my ears are keen. You can't deceive me, man. My experience with rogues has been too wide. You are a born scoundrel. You have carried this note for days—perhaps months. See—it is old and worn, the writing indistinct! Each of your comrades was doubtless provided with just such a mis-

sive."

"Do tell!" sneered the captive.

"Yes. You are not going free. I am going to balk the marshal."

"We shall see."

"You are in disguise, too, and you drop your villainous dialect at will. My impression is, you are far too important a prisoner to let slip."

Johnson shook his head dejectedly, and cowered under the burning gaze of the jailer's pale-gray eyes. There was something about the man that brought fear to his heart.

"You are wrong," he protested, weakly. "I am unfortunate, but not criminal."

Ivan laughed, grimly. Then, with a sudden movement, he clutched the other's right wrist, and with a dexterous twist tore open and pushed back the flannel sleeve.

"There!" he cried, triumphantly pointing to a symbol tattooed in the firm, white flesh. "It is the mark of the Secret Seven! Deny, if you can, that you are a member of that infamous cohort!"

CHAPTER VIII.

FOR MURDER.

When Shadrach Mason strode out of the telegraph office in Crystal City the operator moved forward mechanically, picked up the money and glanced at it, then seized the message, and sat down to put it on the wire.

As previously stated, the telegrapher was stirred by some deep emotion; but as his fitfully glowing eyes drank in the contents of that gruesome message to Duncan Saunders, he became fairly livid and leaped to his feet.

"Good God! What deathnet is this which circumstances are steadily weaving around me?" he grated. "Can it be possible all this is due to chance?"

"No! It is part of a deliberate conspiracy against my life and honor, and that accursed sport is doubtless a party to it!"

Swiftly, then, the hand of the desperate man sought a weapon, and with a cat-like spring he passed from the office to the narrow platform running alongside the building. There was murder in his heart in that awful moment, and as he descried Mason's retreating form he raised his arm, bringing the gleaming revolver to a level.

Then, an agonized groan came from his tightly drawn lips; he shivered violently, and his hand sank to his side!

"I cannot do it! I cannot do it—not even to baffle the inhuman hounds, for it is murder—nothing less!"

"Yes, though innocent of crime, I am doomed, but will not redden my hands with blood to save myself!"

"Adrain! Adrain Yorke! Thank heaven for those noble words!"

Fervently, yet with guarded enunciation, came that utterance, and a slight figure, gliding out of the dense shadows at the corner of the building, hastily approached the telegrapher.

"Mignon Verne!" he ejaculated. "You here! And at this hour!"

"'Tis surely I, Adrain!"

"But your father, girl! He will—"

"Papa Ivan sent me, sir, under Ma'm Lotta's care, with a message for you."

"You puzzle me, Mignon!"

A decided pout showed on the darkly beautiful face of the girl. But it quickly disappeared, leaving an expression of sadness in its stead.

"Plainly, Adrain, you are in trouble and danger, and papa sent me to warn you. You must leave Crystal City and go into hiding for a time."

The words fairly staggered the man. He stared at Mignon Verne like one stupefied. Then he drew a hand sharply across his eyes, stooped, and passionately kissed the upturned face.

"You are both right and wrong, sweetheart!" he muttered, huskily. "I am in trouble, but must remain here and fight it out. To run away would brand myself guilty!"

"No, no! You do not understand, Adrain! Go while there is time, and leave papa to clear away the cloud which has so suddenly darkened our path. It will not do for you to remain here. Your life is sought."

"Does your father say that, Mignon?"

"He bade me use just those words, Adrain! He has discovered the existence of a plot against you; presently, he will know what that plot is."

Adrain Yorke nodded moodily.

"There is a plot—of that I am sure. Until to-night, I would have scouted the idea of secret enemies. Now, I know that I am beset by them!"

"And you, Mignon—say to your father that I thank him for his kindly service, but that I shall remain in Crystal City. I cannot run away."

Mignon Verne received the message in silence, though tears glistened in her eyes. The cool and decisive tones of her lover assured her no pleading could swerve him from his purpose, and in secret her heart throbbed a proud acknowledgment of his courage.

For a moment the pair lingered beside the open door; then Mignon turned and sped back to the duenna awaiting her, while Adrain Yorke re-entered the office.

The telegrapher's face was pale, but stern. Without a moment's hesitation he sat down, and the message to Duncan Saunders was sent flashing over the wires.

Shortly thereafter the delayed train pulled in, and fifteen minutes later Adrain Yorke extinguished the lights in his office and departed.

Straight up the street he proceeded, like one with a well-defined purpose in view, looking neither to the right nor the left, but with eyes fixed steadily on the path before him, until he had reached the saloon and gambling house known throughout that wild district as "The Mecca."

A quick glance right and left as he pushed through the open door told Yorke the place was fairly crowded; but his keen eyes at once singled out the one he sought—a tall, elegantly attired man, but little older than himself, with a dark, Gypsylike countenance.

At that moment the telegrapher's gaze fell upon this personage he looked up. At sight of Yorke, a peculiar gleam appeared in his slumbrous black eyes; but he nodded quickly, smiled, and advanced with extended hand, saying:

"You are late, Mr. Yorke."

"Yes; I was detained, Mr. Taylor."

"Did the fellow keep his word? Did he come?"

"No."

The telegrapher's face clouded, and disappointment shone from his expressive blue eyes.

"I feared he was an impostor," he averred, dejectedly.

"Well, Yorke, we can't tell. He may come yet, so brace up. We'll wait, and in the meantime pay our respects to the bar."

"A cigar, then, friend Taylor, for I never drink."

"Pshaw! man, you make me suspect you are not a true-blue Briton!"

"Nor am I! I owe the land of my birth but little in either respect or good will, but do love my adopted country from my heart's core."

Taylor laughed cynically, and again that peculiar gleam shot from his dark eyes.

"And I prefer the 'tight little isle' beyond the sea," he responded, dryly. "But come, my good fellow, let us take a table

and smoke and talk at our ease while awaiting the rascal's appearance."

Yorke agreed, and they at once sat down, with a pack of cards between them.

"If I may ask, what was this stolen paper?" Taylor continued, when they were fairly settled. "It was stolen, I believe you said?"

"Yes, stolen or lost. It was a sectional map, valueless to any one but my father."

"Your father, eh? He is here, then?"

"Oh, yes. He is a prospector. The map relates to a mine he discovered years ago, in company with two friends. They were driven out by hostile reds, but mapped the locality, then separated the chart into three sections, each taking one, and agreeing to meet at a given point on a certain date thereafter, to renew their work on the mine."

"But fate prevented my father's appearance at the place on the date set, and for many years he has been unable to hear aught of his whilom parads, so came here to rediscover the mine alone, if possible."

Taylor received this information without comment, and for some minutes the two men smoked on in silence.

"By the way, Yorke, I have been thinking this matter over, and with your permission I will withdraw from the affair entirely, now that you are foot loose for the night."

"You will understand how distasteful to me the position of go-between has been, and will relieve me, I am sure."

"Here is the money, just as you gave it to me. I will remain in the place, and if the man appears, will send him direct to you. You will not be offended?"

"Oh, no!" Yorke responded. "And I thank you for the service you have been to me in the matter."

Then he seized the small packet of bills extended by Taylor, and carelessly thrust it into his pocket, adding:

"I only hope the fellow may come. I don't know that the single section of the map would be of the least value in locating the lost mine, but it would afford my father no little satisfaction to try it."

"I have no doubt you will secure it."

"But see: Marshal Tarbutton is bearing down upon us, glowering like an avenging demon!"

True enough! Straight to the table at which the men sat strode the sturdy old officer, his round face aglow with savage zeal!

Adrain Yorke turned pale, and hastily rose.

"Stiddy, gents—all two o' ye!" Tarbutton sang out, gripping the pistol butts protruding from his belt.

"You, British Bill Taylor, steer off to the side thar, an' ye'll escape what ye'd orter had long ago!"

"An' you, Mr. Yorke—hands up! I want ye!"

"For what, Tarbutton?"

"For ther murder o' Darius Collins!"

CHAPTER IX.

AGAINST ODDS.

Straight to the heart of Shadrach Mason went that piteous appeal from the lips of the beautiful captive, arousing the lion in his nature as by a magic touch.

Then, too, a fleeting glance told him there was something strangely familiar in the white, terrified face of the maiden, and that knowledge strengthened his resolve to stand between her and the ruffians, no matter how desperate the odds or how bitter the result.

"Courage!" he quickly whispered, as a savage imprecation came from the foremost of the masked horsemen. "Get behind me. I will save you!"

Then, incisively:

"Ease up, you scoundrels! Not another forward step, or somebody's health shall suffer, and—it won't be mine!"

"Take a fool's advice, just once, and scamper—one and all! It's the last call, and the last chance to get off with whole hides!"

Cool enough, surely—odds considered! But, then, thanks to the belligerent attitude assumed by Bunco Bill's fellow-knaves a moment before, the sport held the advantage of pistol-armed hands, and the gently swaying muzzles of the weapons covered both pairs of ruffians at close and deadly range!

For fully a minute, both horsemen and footmen stood silent and motionless, slightly awed by the easy assurance of the sport. Then a sarcastic laugh rang out, and one of the riders exclaimed:

"Oh, yes—we'll go! We're jest skeered ter death—we aire! But don't ye think ye're putty fresh, Mr. Sport? R'ally, this hyar leetle trick o' ours is none o' yer business, an' I reckon ye're mighty apt ter burn yer fingers ef ye keep on meddlin'. No one hes hurted ther gal, an' no one intends to. We're on'y givin' her a bit o' skeer, fer a lesson in good manners."

"A very peculiar instructive process, it seems to me," was the prompt retort. "On the level, now, are you a teacher of the social graces?"

"Me? Naw! I'm Zeke Jones, an' I'm thet onruly critter's pore ole daddy. That's what I be!"

"Don't believe him, sir! He is not my father!" the pretty fugitive quickly cried. "My father's name is Yorke, not Jones, and he is a gentleman!"

The ruffian uttered a grating laugh.

"Oh, no! et's Jones, an' I'm ther man!" he protested, angrily. "Ye see, sport, ther gal hes some high-flown notions, an' plain ole Jones isn't good enough fer her no more. Yorke, indeed! I'll—"

"Enough said!" cut in Shadrach, grimly. "The little lady's lightest word is good against your oaths every hour in the day—you pitiless hounds!"

"You are in the guise of footpads or highwaymen, armed, and with faces masked, and I would be fully justified in drilling your carcasses full of holes!"

A slight flourish of those dangerous weapons gave emphasis to the words, and each of the desperadoes ducked his shaggy head apprehensively.

"Now, little girl, mount my horse there, and ride straight across the basin," the sport continued, aside. "You will find a canyon over there. Go straight through it, and you will come out on the Crystal City trail, just two miles from town."

"And—you?" faltered the girl.

"Never mind about me! I'll get off all right as soon as you have secured a good start. I've got to hold these chaps in check a bit. Hurry, now! Don't lose another moment!"

Only partially reassured by the confident tones of the sport, the fugitive reluctantly approached the horse, and with a graceful spring seated herself firmly on the saddle, turned, and galloped away.

A howl of rage from the ruffians greeted this manoeuvre. But those deftly shifted muzzles held the cowardly knaves in abeyance until the fair fugitive had disappeared within the canyon.

"Now, gents, one and all, I am going to bid you adieu," spoke the sport, in his cool and deliberate way. "I am going to retreat in exactly the same direction taken by Miss Yorke. Don't attempt to follow. If you do, I shall shoot, and shoot to kill."

"Oh, thet's a game we kin all play at," retorted Zeke Jones, with a savage air. "I reckon ye're not done with this hyar business yet, Mr. Sport!"

"No, I presume not. I am willing to admit, too, that the five of you will very likely succeed in downing me—if you've got the nerve to try! But I'll make affidavit right now that I'll have plenty company out of your crowd on the trip to the happy hunting grounds."

A blaze of anger was in the sport's eyes. He nodded curtly, then:

"One point more: You're hurt, I reckon, by this little circumstance. If so, you won't need to sulk in silence, for I'm willing to give you satisfaction."

"I'm of age, and my name's Shadrach Mason. I'm hanging out at Crystal City, and you can find me there at any time, one or all!"

Then, with a mocking bow, the sport began his retreat, walking backward, slowly and cautiously, with weapons raised, until he had gained the shelter of the timber.

There he paused a moment and sternly eyed the five desperadoes, for Bunco Bill now scrambled hastily to his feet.

All were silent and motionless, but the sport knew that it was the calm preceding the storm.

"So far, so good!" he muttered, grimly. "But I must reach the canyon yonder or give up the ghost!"

Retaining his grip on his weapons, Shadrach dropped his arms to his sides, turned, and sped rapidly across the basin.

Freed of those frowning muzzles, the desperadoes suddenly awoke into fierce activity.

"After that fellow, boys!" Zeke Jones shouted, discarding that husky tone and rude phraseology which had marked his conversation with the sport. "Get him alive, if possible—dead if you have to!"

An answering yell came from the roughs, and then the entire party plunged into the timber in swift pursuit of the fleeing sport.

Apprised of this movement by that burst of vengeful shouts, Shadrach cast a glance over his shoulder.

Fully two hundred yards lay between him and his foes, and he had little fear of the result. The mouth of the canyon was less than three hundred yards distant, and he knew that if he once gained the shelter of the rocks his position would be almost impregnable.

To his surprise, the pursuers did not open fire when they emerged from the timber belt, but contented themselves with an occasional threatening yell as they bounded forward.

Impeded by the thick timber, the two horsemen were several rods behind the footmen in gaining the open ground of the basin; but as soon as they were in the clear they urged their animals forward at a pace which threatened speedy capture or death to the sport.

A second backward glance warned Shadrach of the changed phase of the pursuit, and his white teeth shut with an audible click. Then his dark eyes ran along the course ahead, and he decided to act.

Off to the south, a few yards out of line with the direct course the sport was following, was a large boulder. Swerving aside, he reached it with a couple of bounds, and resolutely faced about.

"Halt!" he shouted, leveling his weapons across the top of the huge stone. "Halt! or I will open fire!"

The horsemen, now less than seventy yards away, uttered derisive yells, brandishing their weapons, and drove forward with roweling spurs.

"Surrender!" cried the foremost, with a savage imprecation. "Surrender, or we'll give no quarter!"

By way of answer Shadrach fired a shot over the fellow's head. Then, as both thundered onward, he took deliberate aim at the nearest horse, and pressed trigger.

With a shrill snort of pain and terror the stricken animal leaped high in the air, then fell in a quivering heap, pinning his desperate rider beneath him.

The second rider, daunted by the decisive action of the sport, attempted to swing aside and abandon the chase; but his steed, terrified by the fate of its companion, refused to answer to bit or spur, and plunged madly onward, to stumble and fall over that grim obstacle in its path.

More fortunate than his leader, the rider swung clear of the saddle, and, without waiting for his struggling horse to rise, bounded away in quest of shelter.

Chuckling cheerily as he noted the double result of his shot, Shadrach quickly sprang from behind the boulder, caught

the horse as it stepped clear of its dead companion, and vaulted into the saddle.

A burst of angry yells followed the act.

Replying with a long-drawn cry of defiance, the sport touched spur to the captured steed, urging it toward the canyon at a breakneck pace, followed by a storm of bullets.

CHAPTER X.

MINER BILL'S ACCUSATION.

Unharméd by that murderous fire from the ruffians, horse and rider won clear of the open space and plunged between the grim walls of the canyon, where they were speedily lost to view.

"Easy, now, good horse," Shadrach muttered, quick to check that killing pace when a backward glance failed to discover his enemies. "You have done your part, surely, if you never again lift hoof!"

"Those rascals are distanced, and we have seen the last of them for the present, for I'll venture not one of them is so foolish as to give us pursuit."

Responsive to that firm but kindly tone, rather than to the hand upon the rein, the mettlesome steed at once fell from his mad coursing into a steady gallop, and a few minutes later entered a long stretch of the canyon, unbroken by bend or angle.

A glance down that gloomy defile brought a pleased ejaculation to the lips of the sport, and his dark face flushed like a schoolboy's.

Nearly a half mile below was the beautiful fugitive, awaiting his coming, and as he swept into view she waved a handkerchief in recognition.

Then, an answering swing of Shadrach's sombrero reassured the maiden, and she wheeled her horse and slowly rode back to meet him.

"I am so glad that you escaped, for I feared that they would kill you, sir!" she said, earnestly, as she took her place beside the sport. "Those men are thoroughly desperate wretches, and I can never thank you enough for releasing me from their clutches."

"Yes; they are bad citizens, and I shall always thank the good fortune that took me to the basin this morning."

The fervent tones of the sport brought a slight flush to the pallid face of the girl, and she quickly added:

"As shall I, sir. But I heard firing. Did you have trouble?"

"A fair-sized row—yes; but no one was hurt, I believe, Miss Yorke. May I ask the particulars of your capture?"

"Assuredly, sir," and the girl glanced shyly at the handsome face of her escort. "My father is a prospector, and we have a cabin a short distance from the basin. Soon after he started away this morning the two men came to the house. They said they were from Crystal City, and that they came to tell me my brother Adrain had been seriously injured, and desired the presence of my father and myself."

"Although alarmed at the report concerning my brother, I explained that it would be impossible for me to go until my father returned. But they urged haste, and one of them started away to search for my father, promising to return to the cabin and await him there if he failed to find him."

"Reassured by their kindly and earnest manner, I at once caught my horse and started, accompanied by the one who had remained at the cabin."

"When we reached the defile through which we were to pass into the basin, we found the second man awaiting us, and I at once became greatly alarmed. Then they told me that the story concerning my brother was only a hoax, and that they had come to take me away, by fair means or foul."

"I began to scream and call for help, but they promptly stopped that, and warned me that if I made any further outcry or any attempt to escape they would punish me with instant death."

"Then both masked themselves, and

hurried me on to the basin, where you so bravely rescued me."

"They did not, then, state their object in abducting you?"

"No, sir."

The sport reflected a moment, then continued:

"May I ask your father's full name?"

"He is known as Edwin Arvol Yorke."

"He is an Englishman?"

"He is, sir—or was, for he long ago renounced allegiance to that country, hating it most bitterly."

"And is he not here seeking a mine which he discovered some years ago, in company with one Hannibal Mason and Deerleg, a friendly Indian chief?"

The girl looked up in surprise.

"Yes, sir; he is," she frankly replied.

A pleased look came over Shadrach's face, and he laughed gayly. His spirits were catching. Miss Yorke laughed, too.

"I, too, am in search of that very mine," pursued the sport, after a moment. "Hannibal Mason was my father."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. And the son of Deerleg, the old chief, is also here. Each of us possesses a section of the wonderful map, and as soon as we can join your father the mine may be found."

Miss Yorke shook her dainty head.

"I am afraid not, Mr. Mason! The truth is, my father has met with misfortune. His part of the map has been stolen."

"You startle me! Has no clue to the thief been discovered?"

"None whatever, sir, unless my adventure this morning furnishes it. The cabin was entered one day during our absence, and the map was taken."

"And the men camped in the basin?"

"They came nearly a month after the theft was committed."

"Miss Yorke, those men are the guilty ones."

"I believe so, sir, for it is now certain that my abductors were part of that outfit."

"Yes. And I may tell you, too, that an attempt to rob the son of Deerleg was made in Crystal City last night, but failed. It is certain, now, that the thugs were after his portion of that precious bit of paper."

"It would seem so, sir, though how they could know of its existence puzzles me."

"Nor do I understand it, but I'll solve the riddle, for I am determined they shall not secure the mine."

"It will be a dangerous task, sir—doubly so if they know you, too, possess a portion of the map."

Then the conversation turned to other subjects, and before either fairly realized it they were out of the canyon and upon the Gilt Edge trail.

A few hundred yards beyond the mouth of the defile, both were surprised by the sudden appearance of a horseman on the crest of a rise in the road, a short distance ahead, and as the fellow drew nearer Shadrach saw that he was Miner Bill Taylor.

The recognition was mutual. Pulling his horse to a stand, Miner Bill tipped his hat to Miss Yorke, and glared savagely at the sport.

"Hallo!" the latter exclaimed, with the utmost coolness. "Now, what's the matter with you, Mr. Taylor?"

Miner Bill scowled yet more darkly, and in tones of suppressed wrath replied:

"Thar's no need fer ye to ask thet, Shadrach Mason!"

"Hain't ye done dirt enough to Ad Yorke already, 'thought 'posin' yer comp'ry on his sister?"

White grew the face of the sport, and his dark eyes snapped with anger. Before he could speak, however, the maiden interposed.

"You talk in riddles, Mr. Taylor," she exclaimed, coldly. "I am sure Mr. Mason can have done my brother no harm, while I know that he has befriended me at the risk of his life."

"You must not put me upon my oath."

quaintance with my father and myself to insult my friends."

"Shorely not, Miss Mona; but ye're mistaken when ye call this spy friend!"

"I reckon he's of age an' kin fight his own battle, so I'll speak my little piece, an' ef I don't hew to the line he'll know right whar to find me."

"Ad wuz arrested last night fer murder, an' thet detective sharp, thar, is the one 'at patched up the proof an' putt et ag'in him!"

Venomously the words crept from between Miner Bill's slowly moving lips, followed by a curt nod at the sport. Then, hand on pistol, he waited.

Stung to her heart's core, Mona Yorke turned pale, and flashed a quick glance at her escort.

Swift came the detail:

"The man lies, Miss Yorke! His tale is false from beginning to end! You see me as I am, and I say that I am neither spy nor detective! What has befallen your brother I know not, but I assure you that my hand has never been lifted against him."

A slight flush came into the maiden's face, and her blue eyes sparkled brightly. Bending toward the sport, she extended her hand, saying, simply:

"I believe you, Mr. Mason!"

CHAPTER XI.

SHADRACH'S PLEDGE.

As he noted that impulsive act, Miner Bill uttered an angry growl.

"Mighty fa'r words, Mr. Mason, but ef I recomembers rightly words hev never taken the bark off a tree!" he sneered.

"Es a fact, Ad Yorke is in jail in Crystal City, putt thar by your doin's, an' I don't see es what ye're sayin' now takes him out!"

"Just explain, will you, Mr. Taylor!"

"Sartin, shore! You found the man Collins dead in the trail; you nosed out the tracks o' the one thet shot him; you picked up the locket with Miss Mona's picter inside; you diskivered the prent made by the filed ho's shoe—you did, now, didn't you?"

"Exactly, Mr. Taylor!"

"An' you run straight to Crystal City, nosed out Ad Yorke, an' putt the hull business in Marshal Tarbutton's hands, eh?"

The sport smiled grimly.

"You are only partially correct, Mr. Taylor," he assured, with studied politeness. "I did inform the marshal of the crime, and put him in possession of such clues as I had picked up. But I did not nose out Mr. Yorke, nor did I know of the existence of such a person until this morning."

"Do tell!" jeered Miner Bill, laughing shortly. "Didn't you ask the way to the station soon as you hee'rd McGowan wuz dead? Didn't you go straight thar an' talk to Yorke before turnin' him up to the marshal?"

"I went there and telegraphed word to a friend of the dead man—yes."

"Tell the truth an' shame the devil—you sneak! Didn't you plan to put Yorke behind—"

Goaded into open anger at last, Shadrach rose swiftly in his stirrups. His supple form swayed aside, and his open hand fell heavily across those taunting lips, stifling the concluding word of that ill-timed query.

Back went the shaggy poll of the rouser under the force of that stinging blow. Tears gushed from his madly glowing eyes—blood from his cut and bruised lips.

"Cuss ye! I'll—"

"Not another syllable like that, Mr. Taylor! Enough's as good as a feast!"

"But—"

"Later on, if you insist! Not here and now!"

Leaving the sport with a hovering over the head of the sport, Shadrach turned and rode off, his hand still smarting from the blow.

and nervously drew a hand across his eyes.

"Later be it, then," he muttered, huskily. "Now, I'm goin' after 'old man Yorke!"

Not a word more; a vicious dig of his spurs, and the rascal galloped swiftly away.

Mona turned quickly to the sport.

"You have made that man your enemy for life," she exclaimed imprudently.

"And yet—"

"You could do no less!" gravely. "True or false, his language was most offensive."

"You are in doubt, then—"

"No; I yet believe that you are guiltless of any intent to wrong my brother, Mr. Mason. Time will tell if I am mistaken in that belief."

Shadrach nodded.

"It is quite true that I picked up the clues mentioned by Taylor, and that I turned them over to the marshal. There was nothing else for me to do," he explained. "The murder of Collins was a foul and deliberate crime, and the guilty man deserves to hang. I could not keep quiet."

"Assuredly not. But tell me about this locket, Mr. Mason. What was it like?"

The sport at once described the tell-tale trinket.

"It was certainly the one worn by my brother," Mona declared, with a shudder. "It has been in the family for generations."

"Yes; the face in the miniature was your own. You looked strangely familiar when I first saw you in the basin, just now, but I could not recall where I had seen you until Taylor spoke of the picture in the locket."

"Oh, my brother! Oh, my poor Adrain!"

"The case may not be as black as it looks, Miss Yorke."

"I fear the worst, sir, unless my brother proves an alibi."

"He may do that. Then, too, the words of the murdered man may clear him of suspicion."

"The murdered man? Did he speak?"

"He charged one Donald Craigie with the crime."

Uttering a terrified cry, Mona Yorke reeled in her saddle. But for the instant support of her escort, she would have fallen.

"What mystery is this?" muttered Shadrach, slipping to the ground and gently lowering the unconscious girl. "Can it be that Yorke is but an assumed name—that her brother is really guilty of that atrocious crime?"

The sport gazed down into the pale, deathly face of the maiden a moment, then gently gathered her in his arms and bore her to the little stream beside the road.

Resuscitation proved a difficult task, for it was nearly half an hour before the girl opened her eyes.

"Oh, say that he is not guilty—that it is all untrue!" she moaned, feebly struggling to rise. "Oh, Adrain! Adrain! how could you!"

"Hush!—no word like that!" gently chided the sport, laying a reproving finger lightly upon those livid, piteously quivering lips. "Your brother guilty? Never!"

Mutely, the dainty, golden-brown head shook assent to the negative. Then:

"Let me go to him—let me go at once. He is innocent, poor boy! He never—never—Oh, Adrain!—how could you do it, brother!"

"Rally yourself, Miss Yorke," gravely urged the sport. "Remember, other ears than mine may hear your words, and—"

"He never did it, never!"

"Let us help him prove it!"

"We must help him—poor boy! We will go at once."

Turning blindly, the sad-looking girl rose to her feet and started toward her home, steadied by the sup-

porting arm of the sport, and cheered and reassured by his hopeful words.

"Never let them see that you have entertained the slightest doubt of his innocence," Shadrach urged, when he had placed the maiden securely in her saddle. "If your brother's plight is the work of enemies, they will use every possible circumstance to clinch the case against him. Force yourself to dispel every doubt, and at all times insist that he is innocent. It will help him."

"And you, my friend? You will help me, then?"

"Help you? Yes! I will clear him, if innocent—save him, if guilty!"

The girl's face flushed, and her eyes filled with tears.

"That is a strong pledge, Mr. Mason," she faltered. "I have no right to exact it."

CHAPTER XII.

CAPTAIN KARL APPEARS.

"Well, never mind," quoth the sport, with a peculiar compression of his curving lips. "Let it answer that I shall abide by my words."

"You see, Miss Yorke, your father and mine were pards long ago. My father was under a cloud at the time, and in his later years he frequently instanced the devotion shown him by his English friend, Edwin Yorke."

"Then, too, I feel that I am in a measure responsible for your brother's predicament. I had no idea upon whom suspicion would fall, but had I acted less precipitately in the Collins matter the result might have been vastly different, so far as he is concerned."

"Yes, that is true, Mr. Mason."

"Well, such being the case, I feel in duty bound to repair, so far as possible, the evil wrought by my thoughtlessness, you understand. As his friends, we must assume that he is innocent, and set to work to find the guilty man."

"But—but do you think we can do that, sir?"

"Yes. The evidence against him, while seemingly of a purely circumstantial nature, is extremely ugly, judging from the language of the man Taylor. This fact will reassure the real culprit, and he may betray himself."

This view of the case served to buoy the hopes of the girl. In her direct, simple way, she thanked the sport for his encouraging words, and then the two hastened toward Crystal City.

Nearly a mile beyond the point at which they had encountered Miner Bill the trail crossed a shallow stream, and as the horses entered the water both riders drew rein with expressions of surprise.

In the middle of the road on the further shore was a rounded heap of stones, supporting a greenwood stick. Tied to the top of this rod was a letter.

"Aha! a post office!" the sport exclaimed. "What do you think of that, Miss Yorke?"

"It is a very singular thing, sir, and is evidently meant for one or both of us."

"And see, sir, it has not been there long, for the stones, taken from the creek, have not had time to dry."

A glance attested the correctness of this observation, and then Shadrach spurred forward and seized the note.

It was enclosed in a plain, white envelope, addressed to "Miss Mona Yorke."

With a glance at that hurriedly scrawled inscription, the sport silently handed the letter to the girl.

Mona tore open the letter, and read:

"Mona Yorke:

"This is to warn you to keep silent concerning your adventure this morning. Your father, Edwin Arvol Yorke, is in our hands, and any disclosures upon your part will seal his doom."

"A like penalty will attach to any revelations made by your rescuer, Shadrach Mason. S. S."

"Good heavens! They have captured my poor father!" the girl cried, in a terrified tone, as she weakly passed the

letter to the sport. "Read that, my friend."

Shadrach's eyes glittered wrathfully as he glanced over the lines.

"They have made quick work of it," he observed. "They have secured your horse and sent a man through some secret pass above here with the message."

"You believe, then, that the letter is true, Mr. Mason?"

"Oh, yes; I have no reason to doubt it, Miss Yorke. We must proceed with care until we learn the facts."

"The signature, 'S. S.' I believe, stands for 'Secret Seven.' Have you ever heard of such a band?"

"Only vaguely, sir, and then from Mignon Verne, my brother's fiancée. Her father is the jailer at Crystal City, and she has heard him speak of the Secret Seven."

"They are said to be desperate men, Mr. Mason, and merciless. I fear for my father if he is really in their hands."

Shadrach was silent a moment, then said:

"Hope for the best, Miss Yorke. The note may be false—we'll soon know."

"Have you friends in Crystal City?"

"Only the Vernes. I shall stop with them for the present."

Then both rode onward in silence, and a few minutes later reached the crest of a hill overlooking the little town.

"Let us go direct to the jail," Mona suggested.

Before the sport could reply, a masked man leaped from a covert beside the road, and boldly confronted them. Although a giant in stature, the fellow moved with remarkable celerity, and ere a defensive move could be made by man or maiden his heavy revolvers swung to a level.

"Hold on, critters—both o' ye!" he hoarsely ordered, with a vicious flourish of his pistol-armed hands. "Stan' still an' let the band play! This hyar is Captain Karl's waltz!"

"And you are Captain Karl?"

"Edzactly, Sport Mason! Ye slipped us someway last night, but—hyar we aire ag'in!"

Taken completely by surprise, Shadrach was quick to realize the utter folly of an attempt to resist, just then. Not only was he covered by the weapons of the bandit in the road, but a sidelong glance discovered a half dozen masked fellows in the undergrowth bordering the trail, all with weapons drawn and leveled.

"Well, I reckon you've got me fairly netted," he responded, in his cool, deliberate way. "What is it you want, anyway? Money?"

"Ye've shore called et, pard sport!"

"I've got only a few hundred with me."

"Five thousand, we wants."

"Then you will be disappointed."

"Oh, no! We'll hold ther gal till ye raises et."

Mona's face blanched with terror.

"My—my father can never pay it," she faltered.

"Have a care, Captain Karl!" the sport warned. "It is needless to distress Miss Yorke with threats."

"Fac's is fac's, an' I've stated ther case. We gits five thousand fer our trouble, an' we holds ther gal till we does get et."

Shadrach reflected a moment, then said:

"Permit the lady to ride on a hundred yards, and I will try to arrange the matter with you."

"Pard sport, ye aire fixin' fer a skirmish with us."

"I am not blind, Captain Karl. Your men in the brush have me covered. I give you my word that I am dealing straight."

"Yer word goes, Sport Mason."

Nodding curtly, Shadrach turned to the maiden.

"Ride on toward town a hundred yards, Miss Yorke, and await me there," he requested, in a kindly tone.

Mona bowed, and silently obeyed.

"Now, Captain Karl, I am ready to talk business with you," the sport continued. "You demand five thousand dollars of me, or possession of the girl until I pay you that sum, do you not?"

"I do."

"Very good. I have said that I have no such amount with me, but I have it in Crystal City. I agree to pay you that amount at any hour you may name, if you will permit Miss Yorke and myself to go our way without further molestation."

"Ye're not tryin' ter trap us?"

"No; pledge you my word that you and your men shall come and go unmolested. Come to the Miners' Delight Hotel to-night at nine, and you shall have every dollar of the money, and depart in freedom."

"Yer word is good as yer bond, Sport Mason; but ye ask us ter take a mighty big risk. What ef we refuse, an' hold on ter ther gal?"

"You will sign your own death warrants!" was the grim reply. "Lay but a straw in that girl's way, and I shall never quit your trail while a man of you lives!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TELEGRAPH SHARP.

"For the murder o' Darius Collins!"

The words rang sharply through the gambling house, and all eyes turned quickly to the group surrounding that table at which we have seen Adrain Yorke seated with British Bill Taylor.

And a startling picture it was that all looked upon. Blocking the way with his bulky form stood the old marshal, with revolvers drawn and leveled, sternly confronting the telegrapher and his friend.

No gleam of alarm showed on the dusky, Gypsy-like face of British Bill, yet one and all felt that the gambler was secretly wishing himself well out of the predicament.

Adrain Yorke, fairly stunned by that terrible charge, stood pale and silent for a moment. Then he shivered violently; a dash of red showed in his white, tensely drawn face, and his livid lips twitched spasmodically.

"It's a lie—all a lie!" he grated, harshly. "I never—never—"

"Let be! Shut an' stay shut, or make a bad matter a heap sight wuss!"

"You, I mean, Ad Yorke! Come along with me, now!"

Crabbedly the old marshal spoke, cutting short that almost incoherent denial. Then he deftly thrust one weapon back into its holster, and grasped his man by the arm.

A sharp hiss from a portion of the crowd greeted this movement—a hiss which quickly deepened into a portentous murmur, auguring ill to the officer or his prisoner.

Swinging squarely around, with back to captive, Tarbutton once more flashed both weapons to a level, and resolutely faced that turbulent gathering.

"One or all, gents—et's no odds ter me!" he grimly enunciated, shifting those frowning muzzles from side to side in a half circle. "Duty's duty, an' I've sworn ter do mine."

"I don't say ther Telegraph Sharp is guilty, and I cain't say he's innocent. But this I do say: He goes with me, or some one will spring a mighty bloody leak!"

Then, ere a single one of the malcontents could utter a word, Adrain Yorke slipped quickly between them and the marshal.

"Silence, gentlemen—one and all!" he exclaimed, with uplifted hand. "This is no occasion for trouble. While innocent of the crime, I go with Marshal Tarbutton of my own free will, that the matter may be sifted to the bottom and the guilt placed where it belongs."

"I never knew the man I am charged with killing. Never a word passed between us. No possible motive could have existed for such an act as I am accused of

committing. And because of these things—because of the damning evidence that I know has been piled up against me—I here and now charge that I have been made the victim of a deliberate conspiracy!

"Sneer, if you will, deny and ridicule my assertions, but the fact remains that I have almost positive knowledge whereof I speak, and I pledge myself to make my secret enemies sup sorrow when this miserable farce is ended!

"Now, stand back, and have a care, or I shall hazard all on a stroke of revenge!"

Not loudly, yet so clearly and distinctly that each word was heard throughout the large room, spoke Adrain Yorke, his keen, cold, blue orbs glancing from face to face until he had mentally noted each visage within eye-range and separated foes from friends.

Pitifully few in number were the latter, for the Telegraph Sharp had never been popular among the class that frequented such resorts as The Mecca.

Awed by the stern voice and fearless mien of the entrapped man, the crowd stood silent and motionless for the moment; then, as the last word, clear and forceful as a pistol shot, crossed his parched lips, his hand dropped swiftly to his weapon, and he stepped back and took his stand beside Tarbutton.

Quick to take advantage of that lull in the impending storm, the shrewd old officer at once hustled forward with his prisoner, and in another minute passed safely out of the room.

"For'ard, now, at a double quick!" he cried, when the swinging doors had closed behind them. "I reckon them cattle ain't none too good frien's o' yours, my boy, an' ye'll be a heap sight safer behind strong log walls than out in ther open, this night!"

"Let come—the heartless hounds! One—"

"Tut—tut! Ye must play ter win, not lose, on this hyar deal, Ad Yorke, an' ye cain't do that with knife or gun! Fact is, thar's a mighty ugly case stacked up ag'in ye, an' et'll take all yer wits ter break down ther devil's web (thar is around ye.)"

"I'll do it, though—mark that! Why should I have killed the fellow—a stranger? Faugh!"

Checking the quick response that rose to his lips, Tarbutton cast a fleeting glance in the direction of The Mecca, then hurried his prisoner onward in silence.

Intuitively, the Telegraph Sharp divined the thought passing in the old officer's mind, however, and under cover of the darkness his lips curled bitterly.

"I'll hear it all soon enough, I reckon," he muttered, in fierce impatience. "Just now, I'll button lip."

A moment later, both approached the calaboose, and the marshal pounded sharply, on the stout oaken door.

No response followed. Tarbutton impatiently repeated the summons, then tried the door.

Much to his surprise, it yielded, and he at once stepped inside, followed by Yorke.

A startling scene greeted the two men.

The scanty furnishings of the room were in wild disorder, while near the centre of the floor lay the keeper, Ivan Verne, to all external appearances dead.

A great oath of consternation and rage escaped the rough old marshal. Then, with a clumsy bound, he darted toward the cellroom.

Needless to say, the lone prisoner, Tom Johnson, the thug, was missing!

At the same moment the Telegraph Sharp moved quickly forward, and sank upon his knees beside the keeper, where with deft hands he unfastened and flung open the heavy blue flannel shirt, exposing the broad and powerful chest.

"Come, Tarbutton—Ivan lives, and we must attend to him," he called, as he caught the faint heartbeats of the keeper. "Drop your search, now, for he can tell you all, man."

Grumbling to himself, the marshal complied with that pointed request, and after a few minutes of brisk work the old keeper began to show signs of returning animation.

"A mighty close call, an' I done reckon et was meant fer keeps, too," Tarbutton muttered, as he ran his clumsy fingers over an ugly wound in Verne's scalp.

"Tell ye what, boy, this hyar town's gettin' a heap sight too big fer et's size. Thar'll be a clean-out almighty soon, or I'll resign. Jest thet, now! A murder, a highway robbery, an' a jail delivery all in one day is puttin' ther pressure a bit too high, you bet!"

"Pretty steep, yes! But here we are, now!"

The words were canned forth by a movement on Ivan's part. Struggling to a sitting posture, the keeper pressed his hands to his head, and his pale gray eyes flashed a quick glance at the two men.

"The prisoner is gone," he exclaimed, in his matter-of-fact way. "It is the first defeat for Ivan; it will be the last."

"Et happened—how?"

"Three men came to the door and knocked. They imitated your voice, and I admitted them. Too late, I saw they were masked—that I was fooled. They overpowered me—beat me senseless. That is all I know."

With this terse explanation, the old keeper rose weakly, bathed his face and head, and in a dejected manner announced himself ready for business.

Adrain Yorke was at once committed. Then, as in duty bound, the marshal and the jailer made a careful search of the prisoner's clothing and person.

A 38-calibre revolver, fully loaded, with the exception of one chamber, was found first, and Tarbutton laid it upon the rough table with an ominous shake of his grizzled head.

Various articles of a trifling nature followed, and, last, a thin package of banknotes.

With hands fairly trembling, the marshal ran through these notes, one by one, subjecting each to rigid examination, until—

"Blood, by heavens!"

Face aflame with fierce anger, Tarbutton suddenly whirled upon the Telegraph Sharp, savagely crying:

"Cuss you fer a foul hypocrite, Ad Yorke! I stood to back ye through thick an' thin, but now—"

A choking snort of rage ended the sentence!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SHARP'S STORY.

Nothing daunted by that vehement outburst, the Telegraph Sharp coldly faced the infuriated officer, a faint smile of contempt curling his full, red lips.

"Well, what is it?" he asked, after a moment. "You what, now?"

"I believe ye guilty—confound ye!"

"Guilty of the murder of Darius Collins?"

"Exactly!"

Tarbutton was quite pale, and the hand grasping the telltale bank bills shook nervously. He eyed the prisoner with an air of poignant regret. Gnawing savagely at his grizzled lips, he continued:

"I hate this, boy! I loved you like a son, almost! How c'u'd ye deceive me so? Haven't I always stood yer friend? Why didn't ye come ter me fer money, 'stead o'—"

"I haven't deceived you, Tarbutton—not one iota," coldly cut in the Sharp, his big blue eyes now fairly aglow with scorn and resentment. "I deny that I am guilty of any crime whatever!"

The burly old officer raised his hand in a quick, repressive gesture.

"Don't!" he expostulated. "Come ter ther facts, man! Let us go over them together."

"It is useless! I am fairly in the net, and the cunning devils have plotted too skillfully for me to hope to escape."

"Prove ter us thet ye aire innocent,

an' ye shall escape—no matter what ther court might find ef ye'd stay fer trial!"

"I'll never run away—never! I'll fight it out right here, if I hang for it!"

"Right, boy!" Ivan exclaimed, with an approving nod. "But I am your friend—you know that! I say, do as Tarbutton requests. I ask it for Mignon's sake."

At mention of that beloved name, a softer light came into Adrain Yorke's cold blue eyes, and his stern face relaxed a trifle.

"For her sake, yes," he muttered, moodily. "Put your questions, Tarbutton. I will answer."

Nodding curtly, the marshal sat down opposite to his prisoner, and abruptly began:

"Tell us jest whar ye bin sence ye left my house yesterday."

"For a week, if you wish it! This is Wednesday nigt. Tuesday I was relieved at four P. M., until six o'clock this evening. As soon as I left the office I hurried to your house, changed my clothes, and rode over to my father's cabin in the hills."

"Ye said ye war goin' thar."

"There I went, too," doggedly asseverated the Sharp, "and I remained until after breakfast Wednesday morning, when I started back to Crystal City."

"Exactly! An' all day?"

"Coming to that, Tarbutton. Have patience, will you? About midway between my father's house and town, myself and horse were roped by a number of masked men, and hurried away through the hills."

"What direction?"

"I can't say. My eyes were hooded. After some miles of hard riding, they stopped, and I was taken from the saddle and stripped of all my outer clothing, securely bound, and gagged."

"For a long time I lay thus; just how many hours I know not, though it seemed days to me. Then I heard approaching steps, and a moment later my bonds were severed."

"When I had cleared my mouth of the gag and my eyes of the bondage, no one was visible, and, to make the matter worse, the soil was so stony that no trace of my abductors could be discovered."

"My clothing lay in a careless heap beside me, while my horse was hitched a short distance away, and I hastily prepared to get back to town."

"Was thar anything missin'?" interjected Tarbutton.

"Yes; a small gold locket—an heirloom, containing a miniature of my sister."

"Is this it?" and the marshal held up the trinket placed in his hands by Shadrach Mason.

"That is it, sir."

"Yer hoss wears a marked shoe, does et not?"

"Yes, sir; I had three deep nicks filed in the outer edge of the left hind shoe. He was stolen some months ago, and I adopted that means to trail him readily if the theft occurred again."

"H'm! Better a' lost ther hoss, boy, than ter 'a' putt yerself in ther way o' a box like this, with yer marks."

"Did ye see any o' ther critters as roped ye, or recognize any voices?"

"Not at the time. Since then I have heard one voice I could almost swear belonged to the leader of the crowd."

"Ha! Thet's a p'int. Whose was et?"

"It was that of Sandy McGowan."

"McGowan! He is dead, man!"

"Yes. But when he started to run along the platform to catch the fatal train, I called to him. He turned his head and replied. In that moment I recognized him. He saw that I did, and a look of terror came into his face. He plunged blindly onward, caught the railing of a coach, and met his death."

The telegrapher shuddered violently:

Shifting uneasily, Tarbutton exchanged glances with Ivan, the jailer, and went on:

"Is thar any way in which ye kin prove yer story?"

"None whatever, sir, so far as I now know."

"No marks or bruises or cuts, ter show thet ye've bin trussed up like ye say?"

"Nothing at all, Tarbutton."

"Boy, this is a mighty serious matter. Ye must think—think deep! Now, what took ye o' ter yer daddy's jest at thet time, eh?"

"To consult him about a bit of paper which had been stolen from him. It related to a mine he discovered years ago, and was valueless to any one but himself. It had come into the possession of some one here who was willing to give it up on payment of a hundred dollars. I went to see my father about the matter."

"Thar's jest an even hundred hyar. He gave ye this money?"

"Yes, to redeem the stolen paper."

"Has this money bin out o' yer possession?"

"I can't say during the time I was a captive. It was in my clothes when I got them back."

"Did ye examine et at thet time?"

"Only carelessly. On my return to town I handed it to a friend who had agreed to act for me in recovering the paper. Just before you arrested me he returned the money, and drew out of the matter."

Tarbutton made a wry face, and shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"Meanin' British Bill Taylor, I presume?"

"He is the man."

"A bad egg, boy—a bad egg! Did ye know thar was blood on this money?"

"Not till you mentioned it just now."

"Ye cain't say how or when et got thar?"

"Certainly not."

At that moment Ivan Verne rose to his feet, and with a dramatic gesture exclaimed:

"Catch British Bill. Put a rope around his neck. Choke the dog. Then you'll get the truth concerning this horrible crime!"

"Mebbe so," the marshal assented, dryly. Then, with a number of twigs he took from his pocket, he carefully measured the Telegraph Sharp's right foot.

The officer's brow clouded. His measurements tallied exactly with those taken by Shadrach Mason at the scene of the crime.

"I tell ye, Ad Yorke, ye're in a bad fix!" he declared. "Ye'll have a tough struggle ter steer yer neck clear o' a rope this deal!"

"Thar's one thing, though, thet may help save ye. With his last breath, pore Collins good as swore thet thar assassin's name was Donald Craigie. Thet may let ye out."

Like one electrified, the Telegraph Sharp leaped to his feet. His face was ghastly pale, his eyes glowed like twin coals, and his breath came and went in short, hard gasps.

"Unsay those words, man! Merciful heavens! unsay them!" he wildly entreated. "Know ye, I am Donald Craigie!"

CHAPTER XV.

PEWTER BULLETS.

Both auditors were fairly startled by that wild outburst, and for a moment stared blankly at the prisoner.

Ivan Verne was the first to recover his wits. With a bound, he confronted the Sharp, and pressed a hand faintly across those livid lips.

"Silence, man!" he cried, in a low, stern voice. "You must not admit that, even to us! Those words, if repeated, would surely seal your fate!"

"It is true—it is true!" groaned Adrain Yorke, brushing aside that stifling hand. "Gentlemen, I was born Craigie, and baptized Donald! But I am innocent of this foul crime as a child unborn!"

"Listen—I will explain: In 1825, my grandfather, Donald Craigie, of Scotland, secretly married a beautiful Gypsy Queen.

A son, born the following year, was the result of this union. In 1827, the Gypsy wife died.

"Two years later old Donald married again, this time wedding one of his own station, a Miss Yorke, the sole heiress of a vast estate, known as Craglands. Contrary to the usual custom of the country, there were no marriage settlements, nor did the second wife know of the existence of her husband's Gypsy son.

"In 1831, a son, Edwin Arvol, my father, was born to Donald and Rose, and he was the only child born of the marriage. In 1855, Rose Craigie died, and eight years later her husband followed her to the grave.

"No will could be found, and it was generally believed that Donald Craigie died intestate. At this juncture, Shmael Craigie, the Gypsy son, came forward, proved himself to be Donald's elder son, and under the law took possession not only of the Craigie estate, but of Craglands as well, a property to which he had not a tithe of moral right, but which naturally reverted to him as a portion of the Craigie estate, in the absence of marriage settlements between Donald and his second wife, there being no will to show that it was set aside as my father's inheritance from his mother.

"In 1861, my father had married a lady named Saunders, and I was born shortly before my grandfather's death, and christened Donald.

"Stripped of every dollar of his rich inheritance by the Gypsy son, my father renounced the family name, taking that of my mother, Yorke, and turned his back upon England forever, angered beyond measure at the unjust laws which could sanction such an outrage.

"That, gentlemen, is the story in brief, and it will explain to you why I use the name Yorke instead of that which is mine by right of birth."

Rapidly, at times almost incoherently, yet with gradually returning strength and steadiness, the Telegraph Sharp had spoken, while both men listened with rapt attention.

"I believe you, boy," Ivan kindly declared, when that hurried recital was ended. "And I believe you are innocent of this crime. Nevertheless, I urge you to keep these facts to yourself, just now."

"What good will it do? Is it not clear that some one knows the truth concerning my name and is determined to use it in bringing disgrace and death to me? How else could such language have been put in the mouth of that dying man?"

Tarbutton, mollified in part, yet sorely puzzled, grimly shook his shaggy head.

"Ease up, boy—thar's a mistake somewhere," he growled. "Let be thet some one's tryin' ter do ye! Who is he, now, an' what-fer would he do et?"

"How can I say, save that it is an enemy, surely?"

"Ye ain't got them so mighty plenty, now!"

"Not one that I can call by name, yet this business shows that one or more are at work."

"Poff! Et's jest cross-eyed luck—thet's all."

"No! It is a deliberate plot. Everything shows it. When you get at the business which brought McGowan here the mystery will clear away. He was at the head of my captors, I am sure."

"But ther motive, lad? Shorely, now, sech a game's not played fer fun, eh? An' Collins—would he 'a' died with a lie on his lips ter help ther men as slew him, think ye?"

Again the Telegraph Sharp's eyes blazed with hot anger.

"I don't believe Collins ever uttered the words imputed to him!" he grated, viciously. "Curse that sport! He is a party to the plot, if not the head and front of it all!"

Tarbutton's face flushed redly, and with an effort he stifled and crushed back the furious retort that rose to his lips.

"Don't say thet, boy," he pleaded, speaking in a thick, uncertain tone. "I

never saw Shadrach Mason till this night, but I've heer'd tell o' him, an' no man stands higher fer truth an' honor. Ye know how I've stood ter ye—how I still stands, spite o' all. But ef Mason says ye're guilty, lad, I'll be sore tempted ter believe et!"

"As would I, did I not know in my own heart that you are innocent, boy," cut in Ivan, sadly. "But a truce to this talk. It is doing no good, but leading us into a labyrinth of dangerous theory and conjecture."

"That is true," the Sharp assented, in a calmer tone. "If you wish to proceed with your examination, Tarbutton, I am ready."

"Et shore looks like a dead waste o' good time, boy, but ef we kin splinter out a ray o' light fer ye, well an' good."

"I reckon yer daddy will swar he give ye this money?"

"He will, sir, and I wish that you would send for him to come in to-morrow forenoon."

The marshal nodded, then picked up and examined the revolver with critical eyes.

It was an old-style, powder-and-ball weapon, but was in excellent condition, and showed traces of recent cleaning and oiling.

"Ye overhauled this gun before ye started?"

"I did, yes, sir. I cleaned and loaded it Tuesday forenoon."

"Did ye fire ary time on yer trip?"

"Once. I shot at a coyote near my father's cabin Wednesday morning."

"Prove thet, I reckon?"

"I don't know. I had started on my return."

Then a sudden thought occurred to the prisoner. His face flushed hopefully, and he quickly added:

"But I say, Tarbutton, here's a point: I was out of bullets and out of lead Tuesday morning, so melted and cast some bits of pewter lying around the office. There was enough for just six balls, and I loaded the weapon with them."

"Any witnesses?"

"Yes. Orthodox Williams came into the office just as I finished the casting, and I jokingly called his attention to the balls, stating that I intended to use marked bullets on my foray through the hills."

"He saw ye load ther we'pon?"

"He stood by and witnessed the operation, yes."

"Boy, this is a big p'int. Ef et is found thet Collins was killed with a lead bullet, et may clear ye."

"As he surely was, man! Look—there is only one chamber empty."

Tarbutton nodded slowly, and his face clouded anew. Impressively, he continued:

"On t'other hand, ef a pewter ball did ther work, ye'll hang high es Haman!"

CHAPTER XVI.

ORTHODOX ADDS HIS MITE.

Greatly relieved by that ray of hope, faint as it was, the Telegraph Sharp laughed lightly, and quickly said:

"Examine the balls remaining in the weapon and make careful note of just what they are, will you, Tarbutton?"

"Shore an' nacherel, boy, fer thet's a part o' my business, jest now. Come nigher, Ivan, an' sot in hyar fer a witness."

The keeper silently obeyed. Then the old officer, with practiced fingers, carefully lifted the cap from each nipple of the weapon, and removed the cylinder.

Both Ivan and the Sharp watched each movement with profound interest. One by one the balls were drawn out and carefully examined and marked by the marshal and the keeper, then replaced, until four had been pronounced pewter. Then:

"Lead, by hokey!"

It was the fifth and last bullet that called forth that ejaculation, and as Tarbutton held it aloft between finger and

thumb his honest old face was a picture of surprise and dismay.

The effect of that discovery was even more pronounced on Adrain Yorke. His face grew ghastly white, and he shivered violently. But no word passed his grimly set lips.

Ivan Verne, quiet and observant as usual, uttered no comment. Yet, his pale gray eyes took on a deeper glow, and he stroked his white beard thoughtfully.

"Et's most a copper-riveted cinch, now, 'at we'll find a pewter bullet did their work fer Collins!" Tarbutton grumbled. "Ef I only knew which et was, I'd shore fix—"

"Never, man! Not even to clear myself would I burden my conscience with such trickery!"

Scowling darkly at that prompt rebuke, the marshal silently pressed the leaden bullet home in its particular cell in the cylinder, then put the weapon together, and placed it under lock and key in the table drawer.

That done, he sternly confronted the prisoner.

"Better a bit knave than all fool, jest now, Ad Yorke! I reckon ye've reeled mighty nigh ther truth in this hyar yarn o' yours, but who's goin' ter believe yer? Thar's a pint, now! An' we standin' ready ter stick to ye, through thick an' thin, ef ye'd jest bend yer pride a weenty-bit an' take hoss-sense advice!"

"Ease up, Tarbutton! You don't understand, old fellow. I—"

"Understand a heap-sight better'n ye think, boy! Old eyes ain't so dim they can't see a bit—an'— Jest look at thet, now!"

Curtly, yet in a voice half-choked with emotion came that torrent of words. Quickly pressing a closely folded sheet of paper into his prisoner's hands, the marshal turned, crossed the room, and looked out the door.

Eyes dimmed with faint traces of moisture, the Telegraph Sharp hastily opened the paper and read:

"Marshal Tarbutton:

"This is to inform you that your especial pet and protege, Adrain Yorke, has secretly taken to the road, and bids fair to outdo Captain Karl in his nefarious calling. This day he shot down and robbed a man twenty miles east of here. It is not his first offense. Do your duty; it is plain enough to you. I will come forward and testify when the proper time comes.

LAW AND ORDER."

A peculiar smile curled Yorke's lips. He studied the chirography a moment, then asked:

"When did you get it, Tarbutton, and how?"

"Right after supper, at Ther Mecca. Whisky Bill called me up t' ther bar an' handed et over."

"Of whom did Whisky Bill get it?"

"A stranger, he says, left et thar fer me."

"A stranger, eh? Sport Mason, I presume?"

Tarbutton did not reply at once. Closing and bolting the door, he walked over to the table and sternly eyed the Telegraph Sharp a moment.

"Well, man?"

"Thet note was in my hands three good hours afore Shadrach Mason got his fu'st glimpse o' Crystal City, Ad Yorke!"

"It can hardly be his work, then."

"Nary bit his! I fu'st thought et was somebody's mighty bad joke, but by-an'-by concluded et means business. I showed et ter one or two leadin' siterzans, an' they 'greed with me."

"Did, eh? Who were they?"

"Fu'st was ther sky-pilot, Camp-Meetin' Tom. He reckoned I'd better go a leetle slow; thar might be a mistake."

"And the other?"

"Orthodox Will'um. Said fu'st pop he be'lieved et. He'd know'd fer some time ye was up ter somethin' deep, an' 'lowed I'd better act quick. While we war talkin', Mason came in after me, an' then ther hull bad business came out."

"Ma on urged that I was guilty?"

"Never a word!" curtly. "Let be thet idea, cain't ye? Fer a fact, I doubts ef Mason knows thar's sech a John-donkey livin' es you be, Ad Yorke!"

The Sharp flushed slightly.

"I hope you are right," he returned. "At any rate, I'd much rather have him for a friend than a foe. But, on the level, Tarbutton, don't you see that this anonymous note bears out my theory of secret enemies?"

"Mebbe—mebbe not. All 'pends on what turns up. Ef ther critter comes for'ard when he's called, we kin bet he's played a clean, white game. Ef not, I allow ye'll win ther call."

At this juncture a sharp rap sounded on the door. With a quick glance at his companions, Ivan rose, crossed the room, opened a slide, and peered out.

After a moment he closed the slide and turned to the marshal.

"It is Weeper," he announced.

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"Admit him."

There was a sort of subdued growl in the officer's heavy tones which did not escape either the keeper or the prisoner. Then the door opened, and Orthodox, rubbing his gaunt hands, slipped softly into the room.

"How do you do, gentlemen?" he saluted, in unctuous tones, as he gravely advanced, his gloomy black eyes taking in each detail of the scene. "Do I intrude?"

"Business is business, Mr. Weeper."

"Quite so, Mr. Tarbutton. Its cares oppressed me so that I could not slumber, although extremely weary, and I rose and came here, seeking you."

"Do tell!" ejaculated the marshal, a peculiar quirk in his gruff tones bringing a smile to the lips of the Sharp. "Conscience hurt?"

"Oh, no! no! The idea! But have your joke, my dear Mr. Tarbutton—have your joke, sir!"

"The fact is, I desired to see you in regard to some very important items in this matter, privately, if possible!"

The gloomy black eyes, shifting restlessly, glanced askance from the officer to the Sharp.

Tarbutton nodded, and rose to depart.

"One minute, Mr. Weeper, before you go," called Yorke, also rising. "Do you remember the pewter-bullet incident of Tuesday morning?"

The undertaker smiled suavely, and replied:

"Perfectly, sir—perfectly! Give yourself no uneasiness on that score. Every detail of that scene is firmly fixed in my mind."

Then Tarbutton passed out into the night, closely followed by Orthodox, and Ivan closed and fastened the door.

A half-dozen paces beyond the calaboose the marshal halted and grimly confronted his unwelcome visitant.

"Now, what is et?" he gruffly demanded.

"Easy, sir—easy! There is no occasion whatever for you to fly into a passion," was the cool retort.

"Have you sent for the—the corpse?"

"Two hours ago, ye donkey."

"Commendable, sir! I shall mention your promptness to your constituents from time to time, as occasion rises."

"And now, Tarbutton, have you the keys to the telegraph office?"

"They're in my pocket."

"Very good. I want you to go there with me at once."

"I don't understand ye! Fer what, now?" stammered the marshal, fairly startled by the sharp, incisive tones of undertaker.

"To subserve the ends of justice. Come! no fooling!"

Awed by that sudden change in Weeper's demeanor, no less than by that peremptory order, Tarbutton mutely strode along to the station.

No word passed between the two men until the office door had been unlocked and a lamp lighted. Then Orthodox turned sharply to the marshal and said:

"Yorke told you the story of the six pewter bullets, did he not?"

"Sartin!"

"Did he claim that he loaded all six chambers of the weapon with balls of that kind?"

"He did."

"You have examined his weapon tonight. What did you find?"

"Thar war five loads in et, one ball bein' lead, ther others pewter."

The undertaker was silent a moment. Then a peculiar look crossed his cadaverous face, and he quickly exclaimed:

"Bear witness to what I say now, Tarbutton. I was present when Yorke cast the pewter balls. There were six—no more, no less. He put them into my hand to examine. I saw him load the weapon. I tell you now that I saw him secretly abstract a pewter ball and substitute one of lead. The—"

"But why? What-fer game—"

"Be silent, will you? The sixth and last pewter ball, if he has not removed it and I am not mistaken, is in a small pasteboard box in the right-hand corner of that table drawer. Look, will you?"

Mechanically, Tarbutton unlocked and opened the drawer. In the corner lay the pasteboard box. Lifting the lid he exposed a pewter bullet.

Savagely, the sturdy old officer whirled upon the dark genius beside him.

"What devil's play is this? What d'ye mean?" he grated with eyes aglow. "Speak, man, or I'll drain yer foul heart dry!"

Coldly came the response:

"No threats, Tarbutton! I mean just this: The lead bullet was intended for Darius Collins, but when Yorke pressed trigger the wrong chamber was under the hammer!"

CHAPTER XVII.

FIDDLING DAN.

It was at least a minute before the full import of Orthodox William's thinly-veiled accusation dawned upon the sluggish brain of the marshal. Then, a sullen roar shook the little building, and he hurled himself straight at the undertaker.

But Orthodox was on the alert, watching for just that action. With wonderful nimbleness for one of his ungainly proportions, he swerved aside, uttering a tantalizing laugh, then, gun in hand, resolutely faced the officer as he whirled around.

"Fool-play enough, Tarbutton!" he grimly enunciated, a mocking light dancing in the depths of his gloomy black eyes. "Will you do your duty now, or am I to believe you're playing in on this foot-pad deal?"

"He never did et—never! Don't I know ther boy? Didn't he—"

"Facts are facts! Come! will you listen, or shall I go sing my song to the Vigilantes? You say quick, Daddy Tarbutton, for—I'm most infernally sleepy!"

A yawn, real or admirably simulated, disclosed the sharp white teeth of the speaker. Weapon in hand, the marshal quickly slipped between him and the door.

"Never thet!" he grated, hoarsely. "Never ther Vigilantes, man! They hang first an' try afterward."

"A very good method in the present case, Mr. Tarbutton, for the man's guilty, fast enough! However, pledge yourself to hear the little I have to add, and I'll go home and go to bed!"

Rallied into his usual coolness by that contemptuous tone, the officer nodded curtly.

"Say on, Weeper, but mark this: No lies now, or ye'll settle with me when this business is done."

"What I want to say is just this: The man is guilty, and there is plenty proof to show it."

"He went into the thing boldly and deliberately. He had an accomplice. McGowan was the man. Collins was doomed as much as two weeks ago, and two good witnesses will swear to it."

Cool, steady, and fully alert, now, Tarbutton listened attentively to those purring, mocking strains. In his heart he believed Orthodox was lying. Yet, what was his object?—wherein the motive?

Concealing his real thoughts so far as possible, the old officer nodded slowly, and tersely asked:

"Witnesses, Mr. Weeper?"

"Dean Bendabuck and Peter Ribsam."

"Ye knew this, the—"

"No! The men came to my place after the arrest was made and got me out of bed. They sought my advice. Coupled with what I had seen, their revelations at once convinced me of Yorke's guilt."

"An' ye advised—what?"

"I gave them an honest man's counsel—just that, Mr. Tarbutton. I advised silence at present, and cautioned them to adhere rigidly to the truth when called to the stand, regardless of any prejudice for or against the prisoner."

"Umph! When d'ye git so p'tic'lar hu'r-splittin', Bill Weeper? What ye got ag'in' Ad Yorke, anyway?"

"My dear sir!—nothing!"

"Then why ye routin' 'round this time o' night, stackin' up evidence ag'in him? Say?"

Orthodox smiled grimly.

"Out of my deep regard for you, Mr. Tarbutton!" he sneered. "Yorke is a most unfortunate young man, I admit; but I could never stand idly by and witness your immolation upon friendship's altar."

"Put it in plain English, cuss ye!"

"Just this, then, my dear Thomas: The Telegraph Sharp is an acknowledged pet of yours, and I feared that when morning came we'd find him missing. That would certainly bring the public's indignation upon your head, and you might suffer. See?"

An expression of mingled anger and disgust crossed the visible portion of Tarbutton's face, and he swore savagely, saying:

"Hosses c'u'dn't drag Ad Yorke away till this hyar thing is cleared up, no matter what I might feel like doin' fer him. Now, you git out. I'll lock up an' go home. Et's 'most mornin'."

"One word more, Tarbutton, then you are free to go. Should the Sharp slip through your fingers while this charge is hanging over him, your heart's blood shall pay the forfeit! Mark that!"

Coldly, venomously, spoke the undertaker. Then, with a mocking bow, he stepped out on the platform and disappeared in the darkness.

Meanwhile at the calaboose, Ivan had secured the door against possible intrusion, and sat talking with his prisoner. Their tones were low and earnest, but an occasional word rising above the pitch of a whisper. Not until the first rays of the dawn filtered redly through the strongly-barred windows did the conversation end.

Then the Telegraph Sharp rose, warmly pressed the hands of his keeper, and passed quickly into the cell room, where he flung himself, fully dressed, on one of the narrow bunks, and fell into a refreshing sleep.

The forenoon was well advanced when a sharp rap at the door called Ivan to his feet, and he glanced hurriedly through the slide.

Mona Yorke was in waiting.

Return we now to that road-side colloquy between Shadrach Mason and Captain Karl, the Trail Robber chief.

It will be remembered that the sport had agreed to pay the following night the ransom demanded for Mona Yorke, under condition the girl be permitted to accompany him at once to Crystal City, when the outlaw asked:

"What ef we refuse and hold on ter ther gal?"

"You will sign your own death-warrants! Lay but a straw in that girl's way, and I shall never quit your trail while a man of you lives!"

That grim reply had fairly staggered Captain Karl, and for a moment he stared at the sport in silent amazement.

Then, with a chuckle, he exclaimed:

"Ye aire a bold man, Sport Mason! Why, yer ole daddy c'u'dn't a said thet any more like he meant it!"

"I am not a coward, and I do mean it, sir—every word!"

"But you speak like one who knows me, and who knew my father well."

"Ye has called ther turn, pard Sport, fer I did know Colonel Hannibal Mason, an' I reckon I wus clus ter hand when ye was christened 'Captain,' and the outlaw's eyes twinkled through the holes in his mask.

Completely mystified, Shadrach looked closely at the fellow, then shook his head.

"Come—come, my man, you have the advantage of me," he exclaimed, visibly nettled. "You have slipped out of my memory, and, though I have known but few men of your size, I cannot place you."

Uttering a rollicking laugh, the giant outlaw thrust his weapons out of sight, and seized a water-proof bag hanging by a strap between his shoulders.

From this bag he deftly drew a violin and bow, and with a ludicrous flourish struck up a wild backwoods air.

Like one stung started the sport, and from his lips came the cry:

"Fiddling Dan! Good heavens! is it really you?"

"Ain't no one else, Captain Mason."

"You—an outlaw!"

"Ain't no outlaw, Captain—leastways, not much. This hyar is our daybo."

Shadrach shrugged his shoulders.

"Come, Dan—no fiction!" he rejoined dryly. "As Captain Karl, you are a notorious trail thief."

"But I ain't Captain Karl, Captain Mason. Thet critter's dead."

"Dead?"

"Jes' so. Ye see, et was like this: After you resigned, the boys struck blue old times under Captain Smith, an' es soon es my term was out I took my papers an' jumped ther service in clean disgust. Sence then I've bin knockin' about, till a month or two ago I organized ther Great Amreican String Band an' started ter play ther camps. Our pockets didn't fill jest right, we got foot-sore and weary, an' hed ter take a prospectin' trip in ther hills for our health. Yestiddy we run on Captain Karl's outfit; thar was a ruction, an' we cleaned ther platter. From one o' ther 'gents we l'arned they war layin' in wait fer ye, so we took ther places. But ye dodged us, an' this mornin' we strung on toward Crystal City, till we see'd ye comin' back thar, when we went into ambush. An' thet's gospel, cap."

Mason had listened with an amused smile playing over his lips. When the giant rough concluded, he quickly asked:

"But you were in earnest in this hold-up, were you not?"

"Jest a figgerin', cap! We kalkilated ef we c'u'd pluck a gent o' your nerve, we'd be putty safe steppin' in Captain Karl's shoes."

"You'd find it a pretty bad business, Dan!"

"Fer shore, an' we ain't none o' us in love with et."

"Fact is, cap, ef ye kin p'int us ter a job of any kind, we're dead willin' ter jam daybo an' farewell touer all in one an' call ther hull deal off."

There was an anxious strain in the big fellow's whimsical voice that spoke volumes, and Shadrach instantly determined to engage them to assist in the search for the lost mine, so at once replied:

"Come into town, boys, and wait for me at the Miner's Delight Hotel. I am going to open a mine, and I think we can make a deal."

Then, amid vociferous cheering and the alluring strains of "The Girl I Left Behind Me," the sport wheeled his horse and hastened to rejoin the wondering maiden.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE PARDS.

Mona Yorke, flushing and paling with excitement, glanced inquiringly at the sport as he dashed up, and in a breathless tone asked:

"Am I to go back, sir?"

"No, Miss Yorke; you will not be detained. Those fellows are perfectly harmless. We have nothing to fear from them."

Then, as they galloped down the long slope and into town, Shadrach narrated just what had occurred, and added:

"I shall engage these fellows to form the nucleus of a force to oust the desperadoes in the basin, for it is my intention to seek the Lost Mine as soon as these troubles are over."

"But here we are, Miss Yorke, in Crystal City. I will leave you with your brother, and, with your permission, rejoin you sometime during the afternoon."

"Alight with me and see poor Adrain now, can you not, Mr. Mason?" urged Mona.

"No, Miss Yorke, I must first put measures under way to find your father. That done, I will see your brother. In the meantime, convey him my best wishes, as coming from the son of his father's old-time friend, and say that I stand ready, and eager to lend him any assistance within my power."

"I thank you, Mr. Mason, not only for myself, but on behalf of my unfortunate father and brother as well," faltered Mona, with downcast eyes.

A moment later the sport dismounted before the rude prison, and assisted the maiden to alight, then courteously lifted his hat, sprang into the saddle and galloped away, leading the captured horse.

Straight to the Miners' Delight he rode, where he turned both animals over to the stableman, and at once sallied forth in search of Pawnee Bill.

The quarter-blood, he knew, was an inveterate gambler, so began his search by making a tour of the gambling dens with which the town was so plentifully supplied, and in The Mecca came upon his man deeply engrossed in a game of poker.

"Bill!"

"Captain!"

Only the two words were spoken, yet each man fully understood the other, and the quarter-blood at once cashed his chips and drew out of the game, to follow his ally to a table in a deserted corner, where both sat down.

"What's up, Captain?"

In response to that query, Shadrach at once plunged into the subject uppermost in his thoughts, reciting the adventures of the morning in detail, then pressed the note found on the trail into Pawnee's hand, saying:

"Now, read that, Bill, and give me your opinion."

The quarter-blood's dark eyes quickly scanned the few rudely-scrawled lines, and as he returned the paper he tersely said:

"Captain, they've got old man Yorke."

"So I decided, Bill, and I've concluded to chip into the game. We've got an interest in this matter, you know."

"Yes; but that wouldn't cut any summer ice with you, Captain, unless—what style girl is the old man's daughter, anyway?"

"A lady, every inch of her—God bless her!"

That earnest response brought a dry chuckle to the lips of the quarter-blood.

"Why, you're really hard hit, Captain!"

"Oh, botheration! Come, Bill—stop your fooling!" and the sport's dark face flushed redly, showing that the quip had struck home. "Really, by virtue of the one-time intimacy among our respective fathers, these people are entitled to all the consideration of old friends at our hands."

"That is true, Captain, and you can count on me."

"I knew I could, Bill. You never shirk."

"Come, Captain!—no flattery."

"It is not that, Bill, but truth, and I felt at once, when I learned of the dangerous situations of the old man and his son, that I could depend on you for a helping hand."

"Yes, Captain, and the son is in a bad way, for there is nasty talk of lynch law secretly going the rounds."

"Ha! you startle me, pard Pawnee! Is it so bad as that?"

"Even worse, perhaps, for the evidence against the fellow is very black, and there seems not a doubt of his guilt."

Shadrach's face clouded, and a slight frown gathered upon his dark brows.

"Bill, I am sorry I turned in the clues I held so quickly."

"No need for regret, Captain. You only hastened matters a trifle. In the end the result would have been the same, for it is known now that the Sharp and an accomplice were heard plotting the crime."

"Then he is really guilty, Pawnee?"

"Oh, yes; then, too, it is said that he has been living here under an alias."

"And his real name, Bill?"

"I heard it called, pard; Craig, I believe—Daniel Craig."

"Or Donald Cragie, Bill?"

"That was it—yes, Captain. It all came out last night in a talk between the marshal and the man, at the calaboose. Some one was listening, and now the whole camp knows the story."

"If this is true, Bill, it reflects upon old man Yorke, for he, too, has been traveling under an assumed name."

"Maybe there is a good reason for it, pard. We won't blame the old man till we know."

Shadrach uttered no rejoinder. There was much food for thought in the quarter-blood's disclosures, and in his hasty mental review of the affair the fainting of Mona Yorke at the mention of that fatal name and her subsequent terrible agitation came back to the sport with vivid distinctness.

"Poor child!" he muttered, in a compassionate voice. "Her heart will break!"

"Eh, Captain?"

"Nothing, Bill—that is—hang it all! I wish the fellow had kept hands off Collins!"

"Better for him if he had."

"And—I say, Bill, I've pledged myself to save the fellow."

"The deuce, now!"

"Yes, Bill, to clear him, if innocent, to save him if guilty."

"You've got a steep contract, Captain!" and the quarter-blood peered sharply at his companion.

"You see, it would kill the girl if he were hanged, Bill."

"Seems it is always 'the girl' now, pard!"

"Don't, Bill! She is pure as an angel."

"And you true as steel, Shadrach Mason! So—count me in on the rescue."

"No, Bill, I'll not have you assume any of the risk on this deal. Besides, we must divide the labor, for the father must be found."

"That is so, pardner, and I'll engage to do the trick. I spied out the old man's cabin in nosing around the basin, and know just where it is. I'll go shift these clothes, fit out for a regular campaign, and camp right on the trail till they get me or I get them."

"I'll arrange to send help with you, Bill."

"No, pard, I prefer to play a lone hand until the game is found. Hold your men back, but have them somewhere near, so they can be brought up just when needed."

"Very good. I will send them to the lone cabin, and you can meet them there and arrange a plan of action."

"That will suit, Captain, for it will give me a chance to study the lay of the land first."

The pards talked earnestly for some minutes. Then they rose and silently shook hands, whereupon Pawnee Bill strode quickly out of the room.

Resuming his seat, the sport, busy with thought and conjecture, drummed idly upon the table with his supple fingers. Presently, he started sharply and quickly rose to his feet as a plaintive melody rang through the place.

Seated at a table across the room was Fiddling Dan, violin and bow in hand.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE GOLD LINKS.

"Aha! the fellow is prompt," the sport exclaimed, as his glance fell upon that massive shape. "It is well, too, for there is no time to lose."

Sitting down, he drew a memorandum book and pencil from his pocket, and hurriedly wrote:

"DAN: Get away from here as quickly as you can without exciting suspicion, and come direct to the Miners' Delight. Register yourself and men, and come to my room, No. 14, as soon as possible. It is highly important that you use every precaution against being seen, for your work will be of a secret nature, and it must not be known that there is any connection between us. CAPTAIN."

Folding this note closely, Shadrach enclosed it in a fifty-dollar bill. Waiting then, until the music ceased, he rose, walked up to Fiddling Dan, and dropped the hidden message into a hat on the table.

His eyes met those of the giant for an instant, and a significant glance flashed from man to man. In another minute the sport was gone.

Room 14 at the Miners' Delight was by no means a palatial apartment. On the contrary it was small and narrow, dark and dingy. The floor was uncarpeted, and the furniture consisted of a hard bed and a chair.

Yet, rude as it was, it was a welcome sight to the eyes of Fiddling Dan when he opened the door and entered, a half hour later, in response to a summons from the sport.

"Well, Dan, you've made good time," the latter remarked, rising to a sitting posture on the flat bed. "Take that chair, squat, and listen, for I want to get you in harness at once."

The rough grinned and nodded, and gingerly deposited his heavy form on the rickety chair.

Now that the fellow's mask was off, he appeared in an aspect far less ferocious than when first we met him. His face, with its massive features, big brown eyes, and long, curling red-brown beard was by no means displeasing, and seemed more expressive of shiftless good nature than aught else.

But there was a pinched look around the eyes, and his garb was of a nondescript sort, picked up here and there, piece at a time, and it was quite clear that he was in anything but affluent circumstances.

"Fer a fact, Captain, I'm dead willin'," he assured. "Ain't no ways p'tic'lar at what, nuther."

"And your men—can they be fully trusted, Dan?"

"Shore an' nacherel, pard sport! They jest follers whar I lead, you bet!"

"Very well. You see, this is a secret job, and a slip of the tongue might spoil all, or involve us in trouble."

"Secret, eh?"

"Yes, Dan. I've decided to turn detective a while, and I want you fellows to help me."

"Oh, Lawd! boss, you a detective?"

The startled air of the giant rough brought a grim smile to the lips of the sport, and in a reassuring tone he replied:

"So I said, sir, and I greatly fear you fellows have been up to mischief—"

"No—no! 'Tain't thet, boss, but ther idear—"

"All right, Dan, we'll let that part drop. What I want to get at is just this: how far can I depend upon you and your men?"

Longly came the response.

"Through thick an' thin, Sport Mason—clean ter ther death!"

"So I know of you, Dan; but the men?"

"Jest try 'em, boss! I'll stand 'sponsible fer each an' all."

"So be it, then," the sport exclaimed, and after stating terms he quickly outlined the Collins murder, then added:

"I want you to scatter your men through the town, Dan. Have them mingle freely with the crowds hanging around the saloons and gambling dens, and they will probably be able to pick up information of value to me."

"I hear that there is talk of lynching the prisoner, and that is a move which I wish to checkmate if possible, you understand."

"Yas, pard Sport. Ye wants ther boys ter play in with ther crowd in this hyar lynch talk, an' then bring me ther information they gets."

"Exactly. They can report to you, and you to me. Then, Dan, fix upon some signal to rally them in case of danger to the prisoner, for I have sworn to save him at any hazard, and it may require a regular battle to do it."

The giant nodded quickly.

"Ye kin 'pend on us fer thet, boss, fer my pards loves ther smell o' powder," he declared.

"That is well, though we shall avoid trouble if possible."

"Go, now, Dan, and start them out, then meet me at Weeper's undertaking shop as soon as possible, for I am going there to look at a dead man, and may need you for a witness."

"I'll be thar, boss," the rough answered, and with a few words of instruction he hurried away.

Then Shadrach returned to the street, and at once proceeded to Orthodox William's dingy little shop.

The undertaker was there, talking in low tones with two men. He started slightly at sight of the sport, but greeted him pleasantly, and said:

"I was just wondering what had become of you, Mr. Mason."

"Been out of town most of the morning. Searching for a lode my father discovered near here some years ago."

"Um! What—"

"No success. My search was interrupted, and I returned, and decided to employ help."

"Help, my dear Mr. Mason? Well, here is a happy coincidence, for these men before you are not only seeking employment, but, I may say, urgently need it, and both are miners and prospectors."

"Mr. Dean Bendabuck and Mr. Peter Ribsam, Mr. Mason."

There was an undertone of secret eagerness in Weeper's disagreeable voice. It did not escape the keen-eared sport.

"Gentlemen, I am glad to meet you," he assured, his dark eyes busy with the faces of the men, as he grasped their hands in turn.

"But my force is fairly engaged, and I can find room for only one of you. You, Mr. Bendabuck, were first named, so you I will engage. Report to me to-morrow morning early at the Miners' Delight and we'll fix upon terms."

Bendabuck, a lean, sallow man of uncertain age, readily agreed to this, and a moment later, in company with Ribsam, departed.

As the miners passed out Fiddling Dan came in.

"Mornin'," he saluted, nodding to Orthodox. "Got thet thar dead man hyar?"

"McGowan?"

"Thet's ther one."

"Yes, sir."

"Kin I see him? I usty know a galoot named McGowan; mebbe this is ther same critter; I'd like ter see."

"Go ahead, sir. Pass behind that screen at the rear of the room."

"I came in to take a look at the corpse myself," the sport remarked, in a careless tone, and he followed the giant to the rear of the room.

The remains of the unfortunate man reposed in a plain black coffin, mounted on trestles. Slipping the lid aside, the

sport-detective and his ally peered inside.

The waxen face that met their gaze was that of a man of fifty—a heavy, sensual face, which in life had bordered on repulsiveness.

A glance disclosed as much; then the sport saw that the corpse had been shrouded, and he signed to Dan to keep an eye on Weeper.

Silently the giant stepped back and obeyed.

The clothing which had been removed from McGowan's body was nowhere visible; but an old trunk stood near, and when the sport raised the lid the blood-stained garments met his gaze.

Then, as he lifted them out, piece by piece, he saw that the pockets were turned, showing that they had been carefully searched.

"I might have known it!" he muttered, ruefully. "If there was aught of a tell-tale nature here, it has been gathered in."

But at that moment a faint gleam caught his eye, and he bent his head over the garment in hand.

There, securely enmeshed in the raveled seam of a pocket were three tiny links of a slender gold chain.

A peculiar look crossed the face of the sport. Drawing the giant to him, he placed a finger upon that tell-tale object.

"Dan, do you see?" he asked.

"Yas, I sees," was the response, in a mystified voice.

CHAPTER XX.

THE SPORT AT WORK.

That his ally was puzzled by those slender links of gold, Shadrach saw at once; but he kept quiet for the moment, to see if the giant would solve the enigma.

Then a quick flash leaped into the big brown eyes, and with an eager look on his bearded face Fiddling Dan turned to the sport-detective, nodded briskly, and in a husky whisper said:

"Yas, pard. I do see!"

"Ther links aire f'm ther chain on ther locket ye picked up on ther assassin's trail, an' they prove thet McGowan, not Yorke, may 'a' bin ther one ter start pore Collins."

"Thet much I do see, but ther riddle is too deep fer me ter read all o' et jest now, an' so I passes till I kin pick up more signs."

"You read it rightly, Dan, for if Yorke can show that the locket passed from his possession previous to the murder, these links—if they prove to be from the locket's chain—will bring suspicion upon McGowan."

"My dear Mr. Mason! It is already known that McGowan was Yorke's accomplice in the murder, for they were heard plotting to do the deed, and there are many who now believe that McGowan's death was due, not to accident, but to Yorke's desire to rid himself of a witness to his crime!"

Startled by that cold and deliberate utterance, the sport half turned, and beheld Orthodox standing just within the screen, regarding him with a sinister light in his sombre black eyes.

"I heard some such rumor directly after my return to town this morning, Mr. Weeper, and also that Yorke had admitted his real name was Donald Craigie; but I was loath to believe either report, for the Telegraph Sharp impressed me as being a dead-square man."

"Both reports are, nevertheless, true, Mr. Mason, and in the end Yorke's stanchest friends will be forced to admit his guilt, for the evidence against him is most conclusive."

"The finding of those links in McGowan's pocket may add color to the accomplice theory, and support the statements made by Dean Bendabuck and Peter Ribsam, the men who overheard the plot, when the case comes to trial."

"Bendabuck, you say?"

"The man you just employed, Mr. Ma-

son. An honest, straightforward fellow he is, too, and I have no doubt he will tell you all he knows concerning the affair, since you are so deeply interested."

A sneer in the last words did not escape the sport, but he quietly ignored the fling, saying:

"Bear witness to the finding of this bit of chain in McGowan's pocket, Mr. Weeper. It may, or may not, prove important. But it is here, and enmeshed so securely in this raveled seam as not to drop out when the pocket was turned. I shall carry the garment, just as it is, to Tarbutton, for delivery to the county prosecutor."

"As you please, sir. I cheerfully bear witness."

Then the sport carefully laid the garment aside, lifted the coffin lid, and again examined the corpse.

"Where are the shoes you removed from the body, Mr. Weeper?" he asked after a moment.

Hiding a scowl, the undertaker pointed to a drawer, and in a grumbling tone replied:

"They are there, sir, in that locker."

In another minute, Shadrach was in possession of the shoes. As he noted their size and shape, a slight frown gathered on his face.

"Not just what you wanted, eh?—my dear Mr. Mason?"

"Not exactly—no, sir. They could never have made the footprints I measured."

"Why do you persist, Mr. Mason, in trying to believe that McGowan was the assassin?"

"I shall answer your question with a question, Mr. Weeper. Who is Ajah, the Seer?"

Ghastly grew the face of the undertaker, and he shrank back in wild alarm, his deep-set black eyes fairly aglow with terror.

"That—that madman!" he gasped. "How—how should I know?"

Then, with a wonderful exertion of all his powers, mental and physical, he rallied himself, and uttered a forced laugh.

"You fairly startled me, Mr. Mason," he explained, with an assumed lightness of manner. "I had an adventure with that lunatic once which I shall never forget. But—I really can't tell you who he is."

"Nor can I tell you why I suspect McGowan was the assassin, Mr. Weeper!"

Nodding sullenly, the undertaker turned and walked away. Replacing the lid on the coffin, Shadrach whispered a few hurried sentences to Fiddling Dan, then gathered up the garment and the shoes and followed Weeper toward the front of the shop.

The undertaker answered a few unimportant questions in a surly manner. He watched the sport depart with an evil look on his saturnine face.

"Curse that fellow!" he grated, unconsciously speaking aloud. "I believe Ajah has given him an inkling of the truth, and that he is determined to try to get at the bottom of the matter. Well, he may get a rope fitted to his neck!"

"An' sarve 'im right, too!"

It was Fiddling Dan who spoke. With that peculiar, cat-like stealth and dexterity of movement which seemed so strange in one of his heavy proportions, he had glided from the rear of the shop to a position directly behind the undertaker.

Orthodox turned sharply. He uttered an oath.

"You here!" he growled.

"To be shore, boss! An' I ag'in rises ter remark, 'at et 'u'd sarve him right, too! Ye got ther turn called thar!"

Dan gazed on the undertaker with an air of owlish wisdom, as if inviting further confidence. But Weeper was on his guard.

"Yorke is certainly guilty of the murder," he assured. "It nettles me to see a man wasting time meddling with such a case."

"K'rect, boss. He'd r'ally orter be stopped."

"Oh, it is nothing to me. I wash my hands of the whole affair."

The undertaker rubbed his bony hands briskly, and glared angrily at the giant.

"Please yerse'f, o' course," the latter retorted, grinning broadly, and with a jerky nod he strode out of the shop.

Meanwhile, Shadrach had hastened straight to the calaboose, where he was promptly admitted by Ivan Verne and Marshal Tarbutton.

Adrain Yorke was seated in the outer room, beside his sister and Mignon Verne. Both girls had been weeping, and the face of the Sharp was pale and careworn.

But he rose hastily as the sport came forward with Tarbutton, grasped the hand extended to him, and quickly said:

"Mr. Mason, before these friends I wish to seek your pardon, for I have wronged you deeply, both in thought and words."

"Then, too, I must own that my hand has been lifted against you in violence, for, angered by your message to my mother's brother, Duncan Saunders, last night I followed you from the office, determined to kill you, but at the critical moment weakened and permitted you to go your way."

"I tell you these things frankly, for it is not my wish to stand in a false or double position with any man—you especially, since you have proved yourself a friend to both father and sister of mine."

"Understand, too, that I am not seeking favor at your hands—"

"Tut! tut! Mr. Yorke. You magnify not only your offenses, but my services as well, I am sure," the sport cut in, lightly. "Say no more about it."

That the Telegraph Sharp was deeply moved, all could see, and Shadrach quickly led the conversation into other channels for the time.

But the subject uppermost in the thoughts of all—the Sharp's predicament—would not down, and after a few minutes it was boldly broached by Yorke himself.

Briefly, yet with much vividness of detail, he repeated his story. Marshal Tarbutton and Ivan Verne chimed in at intervals, and within an hour the sport-detective was in possession of all the facts known to the trio.

Then back to the mind of the sport came the words of Darius Collins, and he quickly asked:

"Your sister and yourself are the Cragland heirs, Mr. Yorke?"

"Prospective only. Our father is the only true heir to that estate, while the man who now enjoys it is but an usurper."

"Exactly, though he claimed no more than an unjust law gave him. Collins spoke of him as the false master of Craglands, and from his language I infer there have been developments of some kind—perhaps an old will found, for he and McGowan were certainly here seeking your father and yourself, while it is also evident that your father's Gypsy half-brother has been somewhere near, seeking to baffle that search."

"Now, Mr. Yorke, I have formed a theory. We have at least the semblance of a motive for the murder of Collins and this conspiracy against your life. Think well for a moment, and tell me if there is any one in Crystal City, whom you could suspect to be your Gypsy uncle."

CHAPTER XXI.

AJAH AGAIN.

"He would be an old man now, and there is no one here whom I could suspect to be him," the Telegraph Sharp declared, after a moment's reflection.

"What was his name?"

"Ishmael—Ishmael Craigie."

"He is not the one we want, then, for we must find a Donald Craigie, other than yourself. So, let us suppose that Ishmael married and had a son whom he christened Donald. A step further, now: We will say that Ishmael married a Romany."

maiden, as he very likely did. The son Donald, therefore, would be only quarter-blood Scotch or English, and we would probably find in him nearly, if not all, the Gypsy characteristics.

"Can you place such a man?"

For a moment the Sharp stared at Shadrach in open-eyed amazement. Then, with a quick gasp of surprise, he sprang to his feet.

"By heavens! What do you mean?" he ejaculated. "How do you know these things?"

"Merely surmise, Mr. Yorke, born of a stray clue picked up here and there. Do not accept the supposition as a literal fact, for it may prove only an airy fabric."

"No, no! Your cool head has gone right to the heart of the matter, and it is now all plain as an open book. You have stated the exact truth, and I would stake my life upon it. I know the man!"

"Ay, an' so do I," cried Tarbutton, explosively. "'Tis British Bill Taylor!"

"The same," Yorke admitted.

"The chief of the Secret Seven," put in Ivan, impressively.

Shadrach's face clouded for a moment. "I do not know this British Bill," he remarked. "In fact, I had another man in view; but since you are a unit in declaring against me, I'll accept your verdict."

"Now, who and what is British Bill, as you have known him?"

"A gambler an' a blackleg," Tarbutton gravely replied. "He hangs 'round Ther Mecca."

"Very well. I'll hunt him up, and see how near the truth we have gotten. In the meantime, I ask each and all of you to remain silent on the subject. If our surmise is correct, a single word may put the fellow on his guard and defeat our efforts to get at the bottom of this mystery."

"That is true," Yorke assented. "My friends, we must all be silent."

At that moment the faint, clear notes of a violin were heard, and the sport-detective rose and hastily crossed the room to a rear window.

Unlocking and slipping aside the stout shutter of iron bars, he hoisted the sash and looked out.

Fiddling Dan was crouched against the wall, regarding the window with an expectant air.

"Ware hawks, boss!" he greeted, with a portentous wink. "Ther corpse hes arrived, ther inquist will begin in a hafe hour, an'—thar's a galoot at ther door with his ear at ther keyhole!"

"How long, Dan?" in the same cautious strain.

"Don't know, boss."

"Wait a moment."

Beckoning the marshal to approach, Shadrach quietly apprised him of the spy's presence at the door, and the two quickly arranged a plan of action.

Then the sport swung himself through the window and dropped to the ground. Whispering a few words to Dan, he pointed to the corner of the building, turned, and walked quickly in the opposite direction.

When he reached the street Shadrach saw that the giant's words were literally true. A man was crouched in the doorway of the prison, in a careless attitude, but with ear in close proximity to the keyhole.

At sight of the sport the fellow started up to move away; but his retreat was cut off by the appearance of Fiddling Dan at the opposite corner.

"Steady!" warned the sport, weapon in hand. "You're fairly trapped, Mr. Peter Ribsam, and in you go!"

Before the fellow could utter a word of remonstrance the calaboose door opened, and he was roughly jerked inside by Marshal Tarbutton and Ivan Verne.

Then the sport entered, and the door was closed and locked.

Never was a man more sadly crestfallen than Peter Ribsam at that moment.

"What were you doing at that door?"

demanding Ivan, naught but a peculiar inflection in his voice betraying his anger.

"Answer me!"

"Restin'."

"Listening, you mean!"

"Naw, jest restin'. I was tired, an' squatted thar fer a bit o' rest."

"But you heard what was said in here?"

"Nacherel." Only the one word, but the fellow nodded shortly, and his gray eyes flashed wrathfully. His assurance was returning.

"I suppose you understand, Peter Ribsam, that we are fully up with your capers," the sport remarked.

"Don't know what ye mean."

A grim look crossed Shadrach's face. He quickly signed to Tarbutton and the jailer, and in another minute Ribsam had been hustled into the cellroom.

"Now, then, you scoundrel! Make a clean breast of this matter, or it will be the worse for you," the sport continued, in a tone of quiet menace.

"I got nothin' ter tell."

"You will have, soon! Take away his weapons, boys. Bind and gag him, so he cannot move or utter a sound, and before the night is done we'll get his story."

Shadrach's orders were quickly obeyed. Within three minutes it was beyond Ribsam's power either to help himself or injure others, for the time.

Then Verne ripped open his shirt sleeve, and revealed a "7" branded on the fellow's broad forearm.

"The one last night escaped. This man will not," he remarked, in his peculiar way. "Before day dawns again we shall know the secret of the Seven."

The inquest on the body of Darius Collins was of short duration.

There were but few witnesses of importance to testify, and each told his story in such a plain, direct way that little time was lost in the examination.

The autopsy showed that the crime had been committed with a 38-calibre weapon. The ball itself was pewter.

All the evidence pointed directly to the guilt of Adrain Yorke. The testimony of his closest and most intimate friends was, perforce, overwhelmingly against him.

His absence from camp at the time of the tragedy, the marked horseshoe, the measurements of the footprints at the scene of the crime, the telltale locket, the bloodstained money, and the admitted fact that he had loaded his weapon with pewter bullets before starting upon his fatal journey—all these things, in cumulative array, seemed to clinch his guilt beyond cavil.

One point which puzzled the coroner, the jury, and many of the spectators was the presence of the single lead bullet in the cylinder of the weapon; but when William Weeper took the stand, and with seeming reluctance related his story, that cloud in the minds of all passed away, leaving the guilt of the Telegraph Sharp standing out more clearly and distinctly.

Under the evidence, but one verdict could be rendered, and under that verdict Donald Craigie, alias Adrain Yorke, was remanded to jail, without bond, to await the action of a special grand jury.

There seemed not a loophole of escape left for the Telegraph Sharp, and his handful of friends shook their heads dismally as he was hurried away by the county sheriff.

Open threats of summary vengeance were heard here and there, and many felt that the luckless prisoner would be lynched before the dawn of another day.

In the midst of the confusion, a terrific trumpet blast rang through the little town, stilling the hubbub as if by magic. Then, near the top of a bluff about three hundred yards away, out of the dense darkness, there appeared a sudden glare of light, which slowly resolved itself into a flaming circle, enclosing a large black hand, pointing a long sword!

A murmur of fear and surprise ran through the crowd. A moment later the bent form of Ajah, the Seer, appeared at the top of the bluff.

"Peace! peace!" he cried. "Perjury is among you. The innocent are put in peril of their lives, while the guilty stalk freely through the streets."

"A wrong has been done—a great crime committed, but—"

A sharp, spiteful bark of a revolver checked the thin old voice. With a wailing cry, Ajah flung up his hands and sank in a quivering heap!

CHAPTER XXII.

A GATHERING STORM.

A yell of execration greeted that dastardly shot, and as all saw the Seer sink upon the slightly jutting rock forming the verge of the cliff, a chill of horror went through the throng.

But Ajah was not doomed to that terrible plunge through space. His hand, catching a friendly crevice, closed with a despairing grip upon the serrated edge, and he was saved.

Quickly following the whiplike crack of the pistol, the mystic light on the face of the bluff flickered and expired, leaving the scene shrouded in gloom.

Then out rang the voice of the sport-detective:

"Forward, men!—some of you! There must be a path up there. Find that man, dead or alive, and bring him down."

"I'll lead ther rush myself, boss," declared Fiddling Dan, in a hoarse whisper, as he brushed past the sport. "Never do fer ther galoot who fired ther shot ter git thar fu'st, fer 'twould mean a shore-enough corpse ter tote back."

Ere Shadrach could utter a word in response, the giant rough darted away, closely followed by two or three of his fellows.

A moment later, Tarbutton touched the sport on the arm, saying:

"Come—let's slip over t'her calaboose an' see what ther sheriff does with Yorke. I reckon et'll fall on us ter guard ther lad this night."

"Yes. But ther jail—"

"All in one hyar, jest yet, an' et's bin enough so far."

With the situation made clear by that terse explanation, Shadrach hurried onward with the old officer, and a few minutes later both were admitted to the calaboose by Ivan, the jailer.

A quick glance showed that the two maidens had departed. The Telegraph Sharp was seated beside a table in the outer room, with head bowed in an attitude of utter dejection. As the two men entered, he looked up.

"Whar's ther sheriff?" asked Tarbutton.

"Gone," Ivan replied, with a peculiar smile. "He fears trouble to-night, and is out to swear in deputies."

The men sat down and talked a few minutes. Then, acting on the sport's suggestion, they entered the cellroom to interview Peter Ribsam.

That ruffian was in a pitiable plight, due chiefly to his struggles to escape the stout thongs with which he had been secured. Wrists and ankles were badly swollen, and when the gag was removed from his mouth his parched and cramped tongue refused for a time to utter a sound beyond a hollow groan.

Under Ivan's ministrations, however, his condition quickly improved. But it was readily apparent that his determination and courage had vanished.

"Now, then, Mr. Ribsam," the sport exclaimed. "Are you prepared to make a clean breast of this matter?"

"I cain't," the fellow groaned. "I—I don't know enough."

"We'll see about that."

"Will ye give me money ter git away on? If I blab an' try ter stay, they'll hev my life."

"Yes, we'll give you money. But, who will have your life?"

"Ther Secret Seven."

"You admit, then, there is such a band?"

Ribsam looked at the sport in surprise. "Didn't ye know thar was?" he asked, innocently.

"No. Only by report."

"W'al, thar is. They's after yer Lost Mine, too."

"Are, eh? How did they learn of the mine?"

"Ther chief heer'd Old Man Yorke an' his gal talkin'. He watched whar they putt ther map, then stole et. They got onter Pawnee Bill, too, an' went fer his piece o' paper, but you stood 'em off."

"Yes. Who is the chief?"

"Zeke Jones."

"Is that his true name?"

"I reckon not. I cain't say."

"You were in the basin this morning?"

"Ya-as, disguised."

"Who were the other men there?"

"Jones, Bendabuck, Johnson, and Bunco Bill."

"Who else belong to the band?"

"Whisky Bill, Miner Bill, an' myself."

"The Seven rescued Johnson last night?"

"We did."

Ivan laughed grimly, and turned to Tarbutton.

"You see, marshal, I was right and you were wrong," he exclaimed.

"I sees, Pard Ivan."

"Now, Ribsam, what do you know about the murder of Darius Collins?" the sport continued.

The prisoner slowly shook his head.

"Fer a fact, pard, I don't know much," he slowly replied.

"You, with Bendabuck, claim to have heard Yorke and McGowan plotting that crime."

"We did, too!"

"It is false!" cried the Telegraph Sharp, hotly. "You never heard any such conversation between McGowan and myself."

"Oh, yas, we did," iterated the rough, grimly. "Ef I was ter die fer et, I'd hev ter stick ter thet!"

"When and whre did you hear it?" pursued Shadrach, with a warning look at the Sharp.

"Two weeks ago, about, jest after midnight, in ther telegraph office."

"False!—false! Utterly false!" shouted Yorke, unable to contain himself. "Stand back, gentlemen! Stand back, I say! I'll strangle the lie in his throat."

Quickly, Tarbutton and Ivan seized the maddened man, forced him into the outer room, and closed the door.

"Now, tell me just how you came to hear the conversation between Yorke and McGowan," the sport requested, when he had partially reassured the trembling wretch.

"And I did hear it, sir," asseverated Ribsam, frightened into dropping the rude phraseology of the mines. "Bendabuck and myself were playing cards in The Mecca that night, when we got hurry word to meet the chief outside, and inside of a minute we were with him."

"He told us there was something secret going on at the telegraph office, and he wanted us to hurry down and spy out just what it was, taking extra care to learn everything possible, as he feared some one was planning a move against the Seven."

"When we got there, we found the office open, with the light turned low. There were two men inside, seated at the telegraph table. One I can swear was Sandy McGowan, for I glimpsed his face, just once. The other was somewhat muffled up, and sat with his back to the window. In size and shape he bore a mighty close resemblance to Yorke, and was so addressed at intervals by McGowan."

"They were plotting to waylay Collins. Yorke was holding off, through fear of detection, but McGowan talked him out of his fears, saying:

"I will entice Collins to the proper spot. There will not be a particle of risk if you do as I say."

"What is that?" Yorke asked, and McGowan said:

"Simply follow my instructions. I will think of a plan to avert all suspicion."

"Yorke promised to think of the matter; and, as they then prepared to leave, Bendabuck and myself hurried back and reported to the chief."

"And the chief?" queried Shadrach.

"Warned us to keep quiet—to say not a word."

"And since the crime?"

"Since McGowan's death he has advised us to speak freely, withholding, of course, mention of himself."

"In the interim, did the chief refer to the matter?"

"But once. He made us swear that if the murder occurred and the case came up, we would withhold McGowan's name, and state, simply, that we had overheard Yorke plotting the deed with an unknown man."

The sport-detective smiled in a peculiar way, nodded, and quickly asked:

"Now, Ribsam, don't you know that the man addressed as Yorke by McGowan was not Adrain Yorke at all?"

"N-no, sir."

"Never suspected it?"

"Until last night—never."

"What caused you to suspect it then?"

"The chief's words and actions, sir. After he heard McGowan was killed, he came to us and told us to use McGowan's name; that Collins had been shot; he believed Yorke was guilty, and wanted to see him convicted. I thought he was extremely anxious, sir."

"What time was this?"

"Early in the evening, just after dark."

"How did he know Collins had been murdered?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Was the chief absent from Crystal City yesterday?"

"I did not see him until evening."

"Isn't British Bill your chief?"

"I don't know. I have sometimes thought so, sir."

"In your opinion, who did kill Collins?"

"Sandy McGowan, sir."

A few minor questions followed, then the sport called Ivan to resecure the prisoner, and passed into the outer room.

"Courage!" he whispered to Yorke. "Ribsam has given me something to work upon. In time, we shall break down the terrible array of evidence so skillfully assembled by your enemies."

"It is to be hoped so!" was the bitter response. "Good heavens! how long am I to remain an object of loathing and suspicion even to my friends?"

"You are neither the one nor the other, for we all believe you innocent."

Before anything further could be said, a peculiar rap sounded on the door. Hastily crossing the room, Shadrach opened the sliding panel and peered out.

The face of Fiddling Dan met his gaze.

"Hist! boss!" the rough exclaimed, guardedly. "They're goin' ter do et—shore! We're hyar, six o' us, well armed an' well mounted, an' I reckon we'd better try ther rifle. Listen ter thet, now!"

The sound that came to the ears of the sport was indeed ominous. It needed no words to interpret its meaning. A mob was coming—a mob bent on bloodshed and violence!

CHAPTER XXIII.

IN SPIKE OF HIMSELF.

There was not a minute to lose. The quick, restless steps of the mob's vanguard could be heard, while hoarse, jeering cries rang out here and there from the maddened men.

Hastily signing Tarbutton to summon Ivan from the cellroom, Shadrach drew the bars, unlocked and threw open the door.

Fiddling Dan, closely followed by four men, sprang quickly into the room.

Then, like a flash, the truth dawned upon Adrain Yorke, and he swiftly sprang back, crying:

"No, no! Not a step we searching pa like a sneaking cur! om with the lu

"Weapons! Give me wir grasp. will face the inhuman d" commanded man!"

Frightfully pale, yet witwe intend ter ling and snapping with fierlf murderers he stood, and the giant she." shrank back, lookin. at flash sport detective. yes. Wi

"Steady, boy!" the late-rio, his lon crisp, cool tones. "Don't left, and befo right now, when a singleould realize make the difference betwibsam was death!" and the doo

"These men are here to ers of the a place of safety. They arbor, where the sheriff's orders, and wed by the p duty, whether you consent and stared i

"Officers—they officers!" ho had so

"Yes; special deputies, sw

dark to protect your life." the mob w Incredulity seemed for theio, but the take the place of rage. Thadrach and sorely tried Sharp could raborway, and once more, Ivan grasped blenter just t shoulders and fairly flung himre you sati

deputies. men," suav "Forward, men—to theorely ain't hoarsely cried Fiddling Daly rubbing Yorke firmly by the shoulderfer charge ing him along. "Rig a rope, we'll mount an' be off." ry."

In less than a minute the ich?" lifted clear of the ground an member c a saddle, where he was snuwd! Who with a few deft turns of the ro." with roweling spurs, the strainer Bill cade dashed away. also belc

And not a breath too soon; fke Shadra last man was fairly settled in or you are leaders of the mob were though wincec the calaboose door! ken comp

Pale, but smiling, Ivan qult belong. them admittance. you've go

"We came fer ther Telegraph You're no harshly cried the foremost, a deputy rough, fully six feet in heightny pris sprang across the threshold, rel reckon hand. "Bring 'im out—you!" h?"

"He is not here."

"Not hyar?"

"So I said, sir."

An oath came from the sp's ther an angry roar from the crowMiner B mob, packed densely around thee. "I struggled frantically in an effo" ter. yas! T

"Stand back, gentlemen!" crto Bill. coldly. "You are not wanted b ther g

"Yer yarn's too thin!" despit

"We'll s'arch ther shack!" are in t

"Yes—or burn et!" doov

The cries showed the ugly mood, those crowd, and Shadrach and Those in promptly took their stand besc Bill jailer. was f

"Yes, you may search the placquickly agreed. "Send in three men; no Ther

A yell greeted this propositional Tar two men were quickly slipped in. calaboose to join the burly rouring a had acted as spokesman. ed str

The first of the pair was Mineavy r Taylor. As he noted the sport's prith ea an ugly scowl crossed his face, des hu nodded grimly.

"There's the cellroom; go sear

urged Ivan, mockingly.

"Yas, yas, hurry up," yelled th and t around the door. whi

Thus spurred into action, the lessl fellows passed quickly into the cell, jus A moment later an angry shout of through the building. It expressed ver disappointment and rage. ed t

"He's gone fer shore!" howled ig to fian at the door. ing

"Then whar is he?" cried anged with a ferocious oath, while he g tin savagely at the jailer. "You tellrwa frog-eatin' Frenchman." limb

"I really don't know," smiled a sh "The sheriff's deputies carried ad l away." cer

"When?"

"Just before you came up."

"But whar'd they take him?" low

"You must ask the sheriff." e c

Not a step we searching party emerged king cur! om with the luckless Peter s! Give me wlr grasp. he inhuman d" commanded Ivan. "Re- 1!"

y pale, yet witwe intend ter do," sneered pping with fierElf murderers kin be tained d the giant phe."

lookin, 32 34.1" ut flashed from the ve. yes. With a bound he oy!" the late trio, his long arms swing- nes. "Don't left, and before the startled then a singleould realize just what was ference betwibsam was thrust back into and the door locked.

are here toers of the committee rose ty. They arbor, where they had been rders, and led by the powerful arms of you consent and stared in sullen rage at y officers!" ho had so easily thwarted deputies, sw your life." the mob were in sympathy emed for theio, but the weapons in the of rage. Thadrach and the marshal cov- rp could raborway, and they dared not grasped blenter just then. ly flung himre you satisfied Yorke is not men," suavely asked Ivan. en—to thebely ain't," returned Miner iddling Daly rubbing his damaged nose. he shoulder charge ye got ag'in Petey Rig a rope, off." ry." minute the ich?" ground an member of the Secret Seven." was snufwd! Who says so?" s of the ro."

s, the strainer Bill Taylor, and I charge also belong to that lawless too soon; like Shadrach, sternly. "Hands settled in or you are wanted here!" were though winced and turned pale, for ken completely by surprise. Ivan qult belong," he protested. "An' you've got no call ter pull me, Telegraph! You're no officer." remost, a deputy sheriff, Miner Bill, and in heighmy prisoner." shold, rell reckon you engineered Yorke's -you!" eh?" tly, sir." eur thet, pards?" senting yell came from the mob. the spr's ther galoot thet balked our the crowMiner Bill continued, with angry round thee. "Le's swing him, 'stead o' an effo"

en!" erco Bill. "Crowd right in, pards, anted in ther galoot!" ck!" despite dissenting voices here ere in that babel of confusion, the doorway was again literally ly mood, those in the rear pushing for- and Those in front. d beso Bill, much against his secret e place quickly followed by Dean Benda- en; no Then, before another could enter, positional Tarbutton created a startling dip- ped in. y rouring a terrific bellow of rage, he d straight toward the open door, s Mineavy revolvers in his hands expiod- rt's pith each step, sending their leaden ace, des hurtling just above the heads e mob, in an extremely ugly man- sear

t to kill, but to scare, fired the mar- ed th and the heavy reports and the men- ; whistle of the bullets as they sped thelessly by were fully as salutary in e cellt, just then, as would have been the houth of a half dozen men. essed, ver doubting that Tarbutton had ed the battle in earnest, and was led g to kill, nearly every man in that ing pack either shrank back or anged aside in sudden fright, and in e g time than it takes to tell it the tellrway was clear.

limbly, then, before more than a ran- ed a shot could be fired in return or a ed ad lifted to prevent the act, the old cer sprang forward, shut the door, and pped the stout bars in their sockets! n the meantime, Miner Bill and his low-knaves had not been idle. With e entrance of Bunco Bill and Benda-

buck the odds turned against the sport-detective and his allies, and the roughs felt that with quick, sharp work they could be reasonably sure of victory.

With a fierce cry, Miner Bill flung himself upon Shadrach. He was closely followed in the attack by Bunco Bill, and the sport at once found himself whirling to and fro in a desperate, hand-to-hand struggle.

Nor was Ivan to escape. With howls of fury, Bendabuck and another ruffian sprang forward and engaged him, using their clubbed revolvers with telling effect.

The fifth man, the spokesman of the mob, none other than the thug, Tom Johnson, in disguise, turned his attention to the marshal, dropping him senseless in his tracks with a heavy blow from behind.

That done, he promptly dragged the marshal aside and reopened the door.

"Come, pards!" he yelled. "We've turned ther tables! Ther game's ours!"

An answering shout came from without, and in another minute the mob was pouring wildly into the calaboose.

Overpowered by sheer weight of numbers, both the sport and the jailer were quickly secured, and then a mighty shout of triumph went up from the blood-thirsty throng.

"To ther tree! To ther lone oak!" they yelled, and ruthlessly dragging their victims they surged out of the prison and down the street.

Right in the center of the town, in the middle of the principal street, stood a massive oak, and here the crowd had prepared for the lynching. A noosed rope dangled from a convenient limb, and heaps of combustibles, designed to furnish light for the occasion, were ranged around.

Those who first reached the oak fired the various heaps, and by the time the prisoners arrived the scene was ablaze with light.

Shadrach was at once shoved forward. His natty attire was disarranged and torn, his hat missing. His long black hair hung upon his shoulders in disheveled tresses, and his face was pale and bloodstained.

But he eyed his captors coolly and unflinchingly, and there was never a tremor of fear when the noose was slipped over his head.

Miner Bill danced before the victim in ghouliah glee.

"Ha! ha!" he shouted. "Meddler! yer doom is sealed! Ye dared ter interfere ter save another; now, who dares interfere ter save you?"

At that moment a horseman dashed recklessly through the crowd, and drew rein beside the captive. In response to that inhuman taunt from his lips burst the words:

"Yes, Miner Bill! I dare!"

Then a sudden hush fell upon the crowd, for all saw that the bold speaker was none other than the fugitive Sharp, Adrain Yorke!

CHAPTER XXIV.

IVAN'S DISCLOSURE.

"Yes, Miner Bill, I dare!" repeated the Telegraph Sharp, in a clear and fearless voice.

"To save me, that man has placed himself in deadly peril. I am not one to forget the debt I owe him, so am here to save him, or to perish with him!"

There were men in that crowd who admired bravery, whether in friend or foe—rough men, whose hearts were not yet wholly calloused, and from their lips burst cries of approval and pledges of support.

Weapons gleamed on every side in the garish light, and in response to the rallying cries of the opposing leaders, the mob quickly resolved itself into two factions, each drawn up in battle array!

In the narrow space between the jeering, hooting lines stood Shadrach Mason, with hands pinioned at his back and the noosed rope around his neck. Just be-

yond him was the jailer, also bound, while beside the two, astride his horse, sat the Sharp, with revolvers leveled at the heart of Miner Bill.

Then a brief hush came over all, and Adrain Yorke again spoke:

"Come, Miner Bill—speak up, for your life hangs in the balance.

"You have assumed the position of leader here, and of you, therefore, I demand the release of these two men.

"Refuse it, and no earthly power can save you!"

White to the lips grew Miner Bill, for he saw that he must yield or die. Then, before his choking voice could form a syllable, the clatter of hoofs broke the silence, and Fiddling Dan and his men swept between the lines, and drew rein beneath the tree.

At the same moment a tall form, closely followed by a half-score sturdy fellows, all armed to the teeth, came up at a run from the opposite direction, and took their stand beside the little group.

A subdued murmur ran through the crowd, for the new-comers were the sheriff and a posse of determined deputies, and all realized that a crisis was at hand.

"In the name of the law, I command this unlawful assemblage to disperse!" shouted the officer, in a stern voice. "Go!—go at once, or by the authority vested in me I shall order my men to fire!"

"Now, give heed! One—two—"

Little need to press the matter just that hard, for with sullen mutterings the rival lines broke and fell away, singly, or in twos and threes, and ere the volley crashed harmlessly through the air scarcely a vestige of that turbulent gathering remained in sight!

"Hardly a waste of good powder, I reckon!" uttered Sheriff Wilkins, with a short, hard laugh. "It'll sure serve as a sample of the stuff we carry in stock, lads!"

An assenting laugh came from the relieved deputies, and then the officer turned to Yorke.

"You see now, sir, where you would have landed had we taken you at your word," he observed, curtly. "No power could have saved you had you remained in the calaboose."

"I do see, sir!" with a grimace. "And I thank you, for you saved me in spite of myself."

"How came you back, Yorke?"

"Out on parole, sir. We saw the trouble at the lock-up, and I pledged myself not to escape if the deputies would permit me to return."

"They came back with you?"

"They followed, sir."

"Fine deputies, truly! And yet—it was well they did come, eh, Mason?"

"Otherwise, my neck would have suffered, sheriff," and the sport-detective warmly grasped Yorke's hands. "This man was the hero, sir. It was a bold act."

"Yes, recklessly daring—one to test the nerves of the boldest.

"But, Yorke, you must not tarry here. Those fellows are only balked for the time. All your dare-devil courage won't save you, once they get a grip on you. Go at once."

There was a commanding ring in the sheriff's quiet voice, and with a nod to his friends, the Telegraph Sharp at once placed himself beside Fiddling Dan, and the mounted posse again rode away.

"You would better have gone, too, Captain Mason," Sheriff Wilkins suggested. "Your little experience just now shows that you also are in danger."

"I've got to stick, just the same, sheriff. The fellows won't catch me napping."

"I hope not, sir; but if you were in my keeping, I'd certainly order you out of town, for the good of your health."

Then the party broke up, the officer and his posse following the direction taken by the retreating rioters, while Ivan and the sport returned to the lock-up.

There, a glance through the cellroom

showed that the prisoner was missing, as was also Marshal Tarbutton, whom the mob had left lying unconscious on the floor.

Affixed to the table in the outer room, by means of a bowie knife driven deep in the soft wood, was a folded sheet of paper, addressed to "Captain Shadrach Mason."

Drawing out the knife, the sport seized and opened the paper.

Written thereon, in a bold and heavy chirography, was the following message:

"Captain Mason:

"The trail you are on, if followed to the end, will lead you to your death.

"We know you to be a brave man and true, so seek no trouble with you. Yet, if you persist in meddling with our affairs, we shall be compelled to silence you forever.

"Take this as a warning. Leave Crystal City at once. The ones you would aid are doomed, and to remain is but to share their fate. SECRET SEVEN."

With a contemptuous smile on his dark face, Shadrach handed the message to Ivan, and calmly set about restoring his attire to something akin to order.

The jailer read the message, then gravely returned it to the sport.

"It is not mere bravado, my friend," he observed, thoughtfully. "The Secret Seven is indeed a desperate clan. In opening attempting to balk them, you simply take your life in your hands.

"I have known of the band for months past. Indeed, I have secretly striven to ferret out the men who compose it, and with partial success. But the identity of the chief remains a mystery.

"It is apparent, now, that they are scheming to secure the Lost Mine; that they instigated the capture of Mona Yorke and her father; that they are back of the conspiracy against Adrain Yorke, and were prominent factors in organizing and urging on the mob to-night.

"So I say to you that they are indeed dangerous men. You would, perhaps, do well to heed this note."

The earnest tones of the jailer impressed the sport deeply.

"I admit that you are mighty near the truth, Mr. Verne," he responded. "But I am on this trail to stick, and stick I shall to the end.

"The Yorkes are in deadly danger, and no stone shall be left unturned to relieve them and thwart the odious schemes of this ruthless cohort.

"Did I abandon these friends to their fate because of personal danger to be incurred, I should never have the effrontery to look them in the face again."

"Right you are," declared Ivan, emphatically. "I am glad to hear that kind of talk. It has a manly ring. Yet, you must not overlook nor minimize the danger."

"Nor shall I."

"And, Mr. Mason, there is another point. You are a man of honor. I am going to take you into my confidence. Don't protest, sir, for I may thereby shed light on some puzzling phases of this unfortunate affair.

"You have seen my daughter, Mignon. Yes. She is beautiful; I, her parent, may say that without fear of being thought an egotist. This man Orthodox professes to love her. He has repeatedly made overtures for her hand, which overtures have been as repeatedly declined.

"Adrain Yorke has become her accepted suitor. Mignon regards him with great favor. I add that I, myself, do, although he has an ugly temper—spring steel and blue fire when aroused.

"Do you see the drift, Mr. Mason? Orthodox is a man of peculiar temperament—I may say, a hypochondriac—gloomy, morose, revengeful, and yet an egotist. He regards Yorke with hatred.

"All this brings me to the point I wish to make: My daughter is in the habit of riding an hour or two every morning, sometimes venturing further beyond the limits of the town than is exactly wise or

prudent. Young spirits are exuberant, you know. Well, one morning three weeks ago, when further out than usual, Mignon was intercepted by this man Orthodox. He again attempted to pay her suit, but was repulsed, whereupon he flew into a rage and vowed vengeance against the man of her choice, Adrain Yorke.

"Mignon fled to me, and informed me of what had occurred. I chided her for venturing beyond the prescribed limits, and sent her home, first warning her to say nothing of the affair to Yorke.

"Then I called on Orthodox. I found him in a contrite mood. He apologized, and begged forgiveness, and I granted it during his good behavior. I did not trust him at the time, nor do I trust him now. There was a look in his eyes I did not like. It was there again when he came to the prison last night. It boded ill to Yorke."

The sport nodded, and a faint smile flitted across his face.

"You are right, Mr. Verne. Orthodox is Yorke's enemy," he averred. "I had discovered as much, but laid the fact to a different motive. In short, I believed him to be Ishmael Craigie's son!"

For a moment the jailer was silent. Then his pale gray eyes flashed vividly, and he exclaimed:

"And he may be that man, sir! When pleading for my daughter's hand, he stated that he expected shortly to come into possession of a vast estate. At the time I thought it was an idle boast, or a mere vagary."

"No. I believe that he had Craglands in mind when he spoke," the sport declared. "In any event, he or British Bill is the Gypsy Donald Craigie. We shall soon know which."

"Yes, for I, too, shall work on the case, under your direction, Mr. Mason. The happiness of my child is at stake. I shall resign this position to-night. I am entirely at your disposal."

"As you please, sir."

"But do you know if British Bill and Orthodox are on friendly or intimate terms?"

"They were until recently, when they quarreled bitterly over some trifle."

At that juncture a rustle of skirts was heard, and the next instant Ma'm Lotta, the Verne housekeeper, darted into the room, crying:

"Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu! Monsieur, ze ladies! Zey ees stolen!"

CHAPTER XXV.

A BOLD RESOLVE.

"Woman! woman! Do you tell me this?" screamed Ivan, for the moment put fairly beside himself by that startling declaration. "You, whom I charged to guard my child most sacredly? Ah-h! traitress!"

"Oui, oui, monsieur, but leesten! Not I am ze traitress. Zare ees no traitress—no traitaire! Ve vent to ze troittoir—ve leesten. Zen—volla, monsieur! Eel vas ye coup de main—von tour de force, and zey vas gone!"

Frantically, in an odd jumble of French and broken English, spoke the housekeeper—rolling her eyes, wringing her hands, and swaying her body from side to side. Then, with a despairing wail, she flung up her arms and sank in a dead faint.

"Poor creature! I was cruel," exclaimed Ivan, instantly all compassion. "She takes this sad affair to heart. Mr. Mason, will you assist? Between us we can carry her home. We will then be on the ground of the abduction when she revives."

Marveling at the sudden calmness of the man after that frantic outburst, the sport-detective looked around for his hat, then gave the required assistance.

The Verne residence was a small cottage five or six hundred yards from the calaboose. By the time the two men reached it, Ma'm Lotta showed signs of returning consciousness.

Waiting until the woman had fully re-

vived, Ivan in a patient and reassuring tone questioned her closely concerning the abduction.

It developed that the woman knew but little. Alarmed by the mob's uproar, terrified and half crazed by its dread import, the two girls, Mona and Mignon, had insisted on leaving the house and going to the sidewalk, to obtain a clearer insight into what was occurring. The kindly old housekeeper, herself terribly frightened, had neither the coolness nor the judgment to restrain the maidens, but went out with them.

A few minutes following that harmless volley fired by the sheriff's posse, a number of men suddenly approached from the rear and seized the girls, stifling their outcries and bearing them away, despite the stubborn resistance offered. Angered by the repeated attempts of Ma'm Lotta to tear the girls from their captors, one of the ruffians had finally turned and knocked her down.

That was the extent of the housekeeper's knowledge of the affair. On recovering consciousness, she had hastened at once to the lock-up.

Ivan received her statements with the utmost composure. Under the fearful blow thus suddenly fallen upon him, he seemed a man of iron. But deep in his pale gray eyes was a glitter that boded ill to the ruffians when found.

"My friend, what say you we can do?" he asked, turning quietly to Shadrach, who had been an attentive listener. "See you any hope of an immediate rescue?"

"Not a ray, Mr. Verne," was the frank response. "We may be assured the scoundrels had horses in waiting, so there is hardly a possibility of tracking them with dogs.

"Nor can we make even a random pursuit with any hope of striking the party, for we do not know in what direction they fled."

"That is well said, Mr. Mason. And it is all true. We shall have to wait till morning even to look for the trail. By that time they will be many miles away."

"I think not, sir. If it is the work of the Secret Seven, as I suspect it is, the young ladies will not be taken far. I am sure they have a rendezvous near Crystal City. In such case, Pawnee Bill, in his search for Old Man Yorke, has doubtless located the den ere this."

"That is the best we dare hope for, Mason. And truly, it is little enough!"

"Yes, yet almost a certainty, Mr. Verne. No keener trailer lives than Bill."

"But—but it may not have been the Secret Seven."

"Perhaps not. We can soon satisfy ourselves on that score, however, by a search through the town. If the Seven are all here, we may safely lay the crime to some one else."

"Orthodox, you mean?"

"Possibly, though I am by no means sure he is not the actual chief of the Seven."

Ivan nodded grimly. Then he spoke a few reassuring words to Ma'm Lotta, and with the sport hastened up the street.

As they strode along through the darkness the two men hastily arranged a plan of action. To facilitate the search, they decided to separate. Armed with the names of the different members of the band, as obtained through Peter Ribsam's confession, the sport was made acquainted with the peculiarities of person, manner, and language of each by Ivan.

At a convenient point they parted, agreeing to meet at The Mecca and compare notes as soon as practicable.

Under the plan agreed upon, the western half of the little town fell to Shadrach for exploration, and he at once set at the task. It proved a bootless one. A thorough search of the various haunts and all-night resorts failed to discover a single known member of the Secret Seven.

"If Ivan has had just such results, we may safely conclude that the Secret Seven

are indeed the sport toward

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are indeed responsible for the abduction," the sport muttered, as he turned his steps toward The Mecca.

Arrived at that resort, he glanced quickly up and down the dark street, then pushed open the swinging doors and entered.

The place was crowded, the throng a motly one—miners and gamblers, ranchmen and roughs, with a sprinkling of Chinese, negroes, and redskins, were present.

He walked boldly into the place, passing directly to the table at which he had sat during his conversation with Pawnee Bill the preceding forenoon.

An ejaculation here and there, followed by a confused murmuring, greeted the sport-detective's appearance, but he walked calmly onward, and seated himself at the table, to await Ivan's appearance.

The angry mutterings told him that he was in danger; but he knew that it was far safer for him to remain than to attempt to leave just then.

Then Sheriff Wilkins moved quickly out of the crowd, advanced, and seated himself opposite to the sport.

"You are in danger here, Captain Mason," he declared, in a cautious undertone.

"One is in danger everywhere, sheriff," was the cool response.

"True; but many of the liquor-crazed mob who sought Yorke's life are here, and, as they attribute his escape to you, they are bent on revenge."

"I cannot retreat now, sheriff. Such a move would only hasten the crisis."

"Moreover, I am here on business of grave importance, and shall remain until that business is completed."

"Defer it, captain!"

"I cannot."

"It must, indeed, be important."

"It is, Sheriff Wilkins, and in confidence I will tell you that Verne's daughter and Mona Yorke have been abducted, and that I am here to meet Ivan Verne to arrange for their rescue."

"By heavens! This is startling news! Are you sure it is true, Mason?"

"I know it to be true, sir."

"When did the abduction take place?"

"Immediately after the mob dispersed."

"There are clues?"

"Not one. The deed is shrouded in mystery. However, we feel assured the Secret Seven are responsible."

Shadrach then recounted the affair.

"Curse that gang! Captain Mason, I would give a thousand dollars to learn who those fellows are."

"Keep your money, sheriff. I will tell you."

"You?"

"Yes. We got a confession out of Peter Ribsam, who is a member," and the sport quickly called the names of the band.

"I shall take immediate steps to effect their arrest," the sheriff declared. "I know the fellows, every one of them, with the exception of Zeke Jones. They are bad men, too, as a rule, but I never suspected one of them of having connection with the Secret Seven."

"And the chief, sheriff?"

"May be British Bill, as you think, though my suspicions point in another direction."

"Well, sheriff, I certainly wish you luck, but you will have to catch the birds before you cage them."

The officer smiled and nodded in a peculiar way, but checked the words that rose to his lips.

A man had emerged from the crowd, and was approaching. Shadrach glanced at the splendid form, dark Gypsy-like face, and costly attire of the fellow, and knew at once that he was British Bill.

"Good-evening, gentlemen," the gambler saluted, in pleasant tones. "I see you are both idle. May I invite you to take hands in a game?"

"I never play, British Bill, and you know it," the sheriff bluntly replied.

"Unlike our friend, I do play, but you will nevertheless have to excuse me," Shadrach returned. "I am not in the mood for it."

The gambler smiled.

"Pardon me! I should have known as much, gentlemen, for now I recall that he sheriff does not gamble, while you, Captain Mason, have certainly had your nerves severely tested to-night. Permit me to congratulate you upon your escape. It was a close call."

"Thank you; yes, unpleasantly close."

Bowing again, the gambler turned away, but paused to speak to a miner near by.

At the same moment Shadrach caught sight of Ivan Verne a few paces away. Their eyes met, and the jailer shook his head as he advanced.

Just as he reached the table, however, a fierce oath rang out near the bar, blending with the sharp cracking of a revolver. In an instant the crowd was in an uproar. Then the lights flickered and expired, and the place was shrouded in gloom.

"Come!" exclaimed the sheriff. "Now is your chance, Captain Mason. Let us go."

"Lead on; I will follow."

"And I," chimed in Ivan.

The three started toward the door. They had gone but a few paces when a surge of the crowd swept them apart, almost hurling the sport off his feet. When he had regained his equilibrium, Shadrach paused in an effort to locate the door.

In that moment, a crumpled bit of paper was thrust into his hand. Then, by the glare of a match ignited near by, he saw the miner with whom British Bill had been in conversation a moment before moving rapidly away.

Puzzled by the incident, the sport thrust the paper into his pocket, and pressed on to the door, and thence into the street.

The sidewalk was crowded, for the uproar in The Mecca had drawn numbers of curious men from the surrounding resorts, but in the darkness Shadrach soon won clear of the throng, without trouble or hindrance.

Moving quickly away from the scene, he turned the nearest corner, paused before a lighted window, and drew the paper from his pocket.

Holding it to the light, he read the following:

"Rom:

"There are fresh complications. We are being trailed in town and out, and must do something to shake off surveillance. Come to me at once. Will await you at the lone oak. ROM."

"Gypsy to Gypsy!" muttered the sport, with a sharp curl of his mustached lip. "Orthodox to British Bill, for if I mistake not in the veins of both men runs the Romany blood. But—which is Ishmael Craigie's son?"

"The miner held this note for British Bill—that is certain. The struggling crowd pushed them apart, and the message fell to me instead."

"But, Orthodox shall not be disappointed. The night is dark. I'll assume the role of British Bill, and meet the plotter at the Lone Oak."

CHAPTER XXVI.

GETTING AT THE TRUTH.

Fearful that any considerable delay for preparation and disguise might thwart the end he had in view, the sport-detective hastily entered a store near by, where he purchased a blanket, and as hastily departed.

The Lone Oak was not far distant, and as Shadrach strode along he took advantage of the darkness to envelop his head and shoulders in the blanket.

As he neared the tree, he saw that the fires had burned to smoldering heaps, whose smoke served to enshroud the scene in deeper gloom.

Then, a dim shape advanced from beside the tree trunk, and cautiously hailed:

"Rom?"

"Rom!"

"Deuce take you, man! You are slow!"

"Would you have me leave a trail for the hounds to follow?" retorted the sport, with an admirable simulation of British Bill's really fine voice. "They are watching us. I had to double and run at random, then blanket myself like an Indian to throw them off."

"Which ones—"

"Why ask that?" impatiently. "You know!"

"The accursed sport, I suppose!"

"Yes, and Ivan."

"Curse them! I fear they will balk us, Rom!"

"If we permit it, they will."

"I looked upon the sport's appearance as a fortunate thing for us. He had picked up the clues with a master hand that seemed to clinch the guilt of Yorke. But his rescue of the girl and his bold stand in behalf of the Sharp have caused me to change my mind. We must rid ourselves of him."

"Easier said than done, I fear."

"Yes, but we must do it. He has made friends with Sheriff Wilkins, and I am confident, too, that the Giant Fiddler and his men are in his employ. Certain it is that when we reached the top of the bluff to-night, in quest of Ajah, the giant and his men were there ahead of us. Later, they carried the Sharp away before the mob could reach him."

"It looks like collusion, surely. But, Rom, did the giant get the old man, do you know?"

"No; he escaped. We must now bend every energy to recapture him."

"Or kill him!" ventured Shadrach, with savage earnestness.

The plotter shuddered.

"Oh, no! no! Not that!" he cried, with a quick, imperious gesture. "Know you, Roebuck, my heart stood still to-night when you fired that well-nigh fatal shot! No, let us not kill him. Recapture and reincarceration in the madhouse is the plan. And, it is bad enough at that!"

"Craigie! you are weak!"

"Weak! Yes! But not for all of England would I have that man's blood upon my head! Would he give up his father's will, or could we find it, so it could be destroyed, all would be well. We could wed the girls, and with them return to England, leaving him and the Cragland heirs to their own devices. But—it is not to be!"

"No, it is not to be, I fear!" and Shadrach mutely chuckled. "Yet I hope we may some time find the will."

"McGowan was sure 'twas in Collins's possession, but it was not among the detective's papers. Certain it is, McGowan was not thoroughly in his employer's confidence. The secret of the will's whereabouts was shared by Collins alone, unless—unless—"

"Well, Craigie?"

The plotter sharply gripped the sport-detective's arm.

"Not that name, here, Rom!" he hissed, with a fitful glow in his sunken black eyes. "Twice now have you used it, and—even these shadows may have ears!"

"True, Rom—true! A truce to it, then! But, you were saying something—you hesitated—"

"Yes, at a thought which appals me! What if Collins, in his dying moments, confided all to the sport? What then?"

"Ay! But, Rom, I can hardly believe that he did."

"Man, we know not the depths of Captain Mason's cunning! His dark face is an ill omen to us, be assured! There is a gleam in his eye that makes me shudder—a ring in his tones that sinks into my soul like a knell of fate! I dread the man!"

"Rom! Rom! You are moody—fanciful! Your imagination runs riot. You

dream, and this affair preys upon your mind!"

"No! 'Tis not imagination. He asked me to-day to say who is Ajah, the Seer. Rom, my heart stood still. That man knows!"

"Well, say he does?"

The shivering wretch ignored that blunt question.

"And the will, Rom—what if Collins confided fully in him?" he asked. "Don't you see, man, that we are standing on the verge of ruin? Suppose he has told the sheriff, Verne, Tarbutton, Yorke himself, and others?"

"Mere fancy, man!"

"I fear not. We must capture him, Rom—torture must wring the truth from him. Then, with the girls our wives, if it comes to the worst we can dictate terms."

"That is true."

"Yes. I have pondered the matter deeply. They must wed us to-morrow night."

"But the Verne girl—"

"Has no interest, I know, as the estate descends from father to son. But I love her—madly. You, of course, as the husband of Mona, will hold the real key to the situation, and that will answer for me, as well."

"To be sure!" dryly. "But if the brother hangs—"

"Hang he must, for I hate him! And his disgraceful death will tear the last atom of love for him from Mignon's heart. Ah, I have plotted well, Rom!"

"Deeply, indeed!" and the sport-detective flushed with disgust and loathing, while his hands clenched beneath the folds of the blanket. "But you are sure, Rom, that the marriages can be forced to-morrow night?"

"Ay! We have both maidens at the rendezvous."

"True; but the dominie? To serve its purpose each marriage must be legal."

"Camp-Meeting Tom will answer. To-morrow night we can decoy him into the hills. If a fat fee fails to win his consent, a cocked revolver at his head will bring him to terms."

"I suppose so. Yet, the sky pilot may prove true as steel to the principles he teaches, and die before yielding."

"Yes, there are such fools, but Tom, I am sure, will weaken," the plotter declared, in contemptuous tones.

"And now, Rom, we must plot to rid ourselves of these spies. As my note told you, they are at work, seeking the rendezvous."

"So you said, but I do not understand. Who and how many are at work?" and the voice of the sport seemed fraught with anxiety.

"How many I know not, but the quarter-blood, Pawnee Bill, has been seen prowling about this afternoon, and the messenger asserted that he was following the trail of Edwin Yorke's abductors."

"The deuce! That is bad."

"Yes, for the fellow had picked up the trail, and was within a couple of miles of the rendezvous when discovered. An ambush was laid, with what result I cannot say. I rallied the Seven and sent all out with the girls, for there may be a force in hiding near to support the trailer. It is well we increased our strength beyond the original Seven."

"Now, we must to work here, and secure the sport and Ivan before the night is done."

"How many of the men are in town?"

"Three of the miners, making our force five—ample, I should say, to handle the matter."

"And the plan?"

"Ivan first, then the sport. We must take them singly, and quickly."

"It may be done."

"It must be done! There is another consideration, too, to urge us on."

"Name it!"

"With the sport and Pawnee Bill both in hand, we shall have the complete key to the location of the Lost Mine."

"Even so. That is worth the risk, at any rate."

"Yes, and with these men safely caged we may feel reasonably secure once more."

The sport-detective pondered a moment. Revelations had crowded upon him thick and fast during that stolen interview, and for the nonce he was puzzled just how to proceed.

Should he hazard all on the immediate capture of the bold and reckless scoundrel, or should he attempt to delve deeper into the plot against Adrain Yorke?

He finally resolved to lead back to the tragedy itself, dangerous as that course would be, in the hope that he might learn something of value in the establishment of the Telegraph Sharp's innocence.

"And Yorke?" he added. "Shall we make a further effort to send him out of the world, or leave that to the law?"

"To the law. 'Twill be better. The case is clinched, and the fool will not run away. He will return and stand trial."

"But, in the meantime, if something occurs to break down the evidence—"

"You are growing nervous now, Roebuck!" laughed Orthodox. "McGowan's unfortunate slip, as you must know, leaves no one but the Sharp—"

A tall form darted from behind the tree, and a hand fell sharply across the plotter's lips, stifling the remainder of the sentence.

"Fool!" grated British Bill. "Do you not see you have been imposed upon—that you are dribbling our secrets to the accursed sport?"

Letting fall the blanket, Shadrach quickly grasped his weapons. Before he could draw to defend himself, however, a crushing blow from the rear laid him senseless at the feet of his enemies.

CHAPTER XXVII.

GOLD, AND THE TRAIL.

When Pawnee Bill rode out of Crystal City to seek the trail of Edwin Yorke's captors, he was splendidly mounted and thoroughly armed, and a trained pack horse closely followed the animal he rode.

At the little stream where we have seen Shadrach Mason secure the note addressed to Mona Yorke and signed "S. S.," the quarter-blood dismounted and carefully scanned the earth around the tiny heap of boulders.

But the roadbed just there was of logs, chinked in with broken stones, and no trace of the outlaw messenger was to be discovered.

Then a glance at the greenwood sod showed that it had been wrenched from a species of willow, and Pawnee Bill smiled grimly.

"The fellow came through by the bluff, and followed the stream bed down to the trail," he muttered. "This willow grows abundantly above, but not a bush of it is to be seen in this vicinity."

"He may have retraced his steps and gone into ambush, but the chances are he has pushed on to town, so I will venture to take the short cut to the basin."

Springing into the saddle, the trailer rode into the water, and turned his horse's head up stream.

A mile above the crossing he came to a break in the steep banks of the creek, and rode out upon a narrow, sandy beach.

Here footprints were plainly discernible, and a glance showed that the messenger had used that route both going to and returning from the crossing.

Even the willow bush at which he had halted to secure the stick was indicated by the trampled sand.

These things Pawnee read without drawing rein. Keenly alert, he cantered briskly onward, and a half hour later came out upon a short ledge overlooking the basin.

Dismounting, he quickly tethered his horses in a clump of dwarfed trees, then glass in hand crept out to a growth of bushes on the verge of the bluff.

A careful survey of the basin disclosed the dead horse near the bog where the sport-detective had made his stand against the five outlaws early in the day.

But the temporary camp in the thicket on the opposite side of the circular valley was gone, and no sign of life was visible, save a number of buzzards, wheeling and circling above the deadening mal.

Even the feathered songsters which the basin abounded were silent, and over all hung a solemn hush.

"It's mighty queer," muttered Pawnee, putting down the glass and seating himself on the rock. "Were I possessed of the superstitious nature of my red ancestors, I'd jump to the conclusion that the Evil Spirit was abroad in the valley."

"But constant association with matter-of-fact paleface has destroyed whatever of poetic fancy there remains to me, and I can't just go the Spirit theory."

"No! There is a natural cause for brooding silence. Now, what is it?"

Again the quarter-blood seized the glass and narrowly scanned the valley, going over it almost inch by inch without result.

"Something has happened here—something which has startled every living thing save yonder buzzards," he told himself, slowly rising. "The way is clear, and I'll go down and investigate."

Leaving his pack animal in the tiny clump, Pawnee mounted, loosened the revolvers in his holsters, and slowly alighted down the shelving path into the basin.

First he approached the boulder, which lay the horse, then turned toward the canyon mouth.

A sharp cry burst from his lips. The way was blocked!

Where had been an open passage leading to the outer world now reposed thousands of tons of stone!

"They have exploded a mine and closed the canyon!"

Wheeling his horse, the quarter-blood rode rapidly across to the timber, halted at the deserted camp.

There he saw that the fissure leading away toward Yorke's cabin had also been choked with the debris from a mighty blast.

"The fools! Do they think to barter delay pursuit?"

Pawnee's lips curled grimly. Dismounting, he walked over to the chaotic mass marking the spot where had been the mouth of the fissure.

The blast had been a powerful one. Great masses of rock and sections of the cliff had been torn loose and fallen into the rift, and the earth for many yards around was scarred and seamed.

As he gazed at the foot of a battered ledge, the trailer uttered a peculiar cry and sprang forward, falling upon his knees beside the rock.

"Gold!" he cried. "By heavens, this is the Lost Mine!"

True enough! That terrific blast had uncovered the hidden vein, and the eyes of the quarter-blood twinkled brightly as he noted the visible extent of the treasure.

"There's enough for all!" he laughed. "Yorke, the captain, and myself! The stories of Deerleg were not fables."

Then, with deft hands, Pawnee hid the exposed vein from view, mounted, and galloped back to the pack horse.

"Now, for the cabin and the trail. Gold must not blind my eyes."

Like one thoroughly familiar with the wild surroundings, the quarter-blood rode briskly along the bluff, then descended into a narrow gorge, and an hour later came out in the valley in which was situated Yorke's cabin.

A cautious survey of the premises assured him they were deserted. Approaching, he stabled his pack horse, and entered the house.

Everything was as Mona Yorke left it that morning, when lured away by the chief of the Secret Seven; but

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I search, yet find the trail I must!"
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hour passed thus. Then, with a
ters ply drawn breath of relief, the quar-
ere blood checked his horse and sprang
h. the saddle.

l Pawfew paces distant a narrow ledge
tingped out from the hillside. In the
ssessow of this ledge lay a miner's pick,
red handle freshly broken, while the
isionit earth yet showed signs of a strug-
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withHere they captured him, and that he
destitd manfully all signs show, for the
remh is cut and trampled, while those
e mas are blood.

Three there were against him, with
e for advantage of surprise, yet one fell
s ttle, dead or surely wounded.

izedCome, good horse, the trail is plain,
e v' we'll run it home."

nchlated, now that the course seemed
n, Pawnee briskly set off afoot, close-
e—followed by the well-trained steed.

y 1/er hill and dale he pressed, pausing
tolda when the trace grew faint, or
is celing 'round and 'round in spreading
, les where it was lost to view in some
e tity waste, until the lengthening shad-
d th told him night was near.

wly alting, then, upon a low bluff over-
basting a wooded valley, he glanced
der, kly at his surroundings, then at the
l toing sun.

An hour yet, and an hour means
s. h! The game is near, I know, for
have moved in a half circle, and the
ge! Edge trail is yonder, scarcely two
repes distant, and they have never
ssed it!

ne Starlight, boy, the trace is plain in
soft mold of the valley. Let us on
er-th speed, yet cautiously."

er, he horse answered with a look almost
nan, then with rider seated firmly in
leaddle once more slowly followed the
so ll down into the valley.

mi here, as predicted, the trace lay plain.
ring the horse free rein, Pawnee swept
balward at a gallop, rifle in hand, eyes
l ears alert for sight or sound indic-
move of human presence.

ic Nearly a mile thus, then a word
encked the steed, and the rider slipped
ckly to the ground.

ul! Down, Starlight—down! They're in
of bush just ahead—the devils!"

en The swift cracking of rifles followed
ya words.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE OUTLAW MINERS.

"Hold on, old man! Down with yer
ensk an' han's up, fer ye goes with us!"
uch was the stern command that
st beted Edwin Yorke as he crouched,
e dk in hand, beside the ledge, seeking
inkes of the precious yellow metal.

enA tall man was the old Englishman,
aight as a poplar despite his years
ghl splendidly formed, with fearless eyes
al a stern, grave countenance.

his prospector's garb sat him well. An
id tive, outdoor life, while bronzing his
t, go and hands, had developed and hard-
ed his muscles, and he looked every-
th a man, as he sprang up and faced
s assailants, in response to that hoarse
allenge.

th "Who are you? What do you want?"
d r, crisply retorted.

en "Who we is don't matter, but we
ants you, so drop that pick an' putt
s, yer han's."

"An' in a holy hurry, too, Pard Eng-
sh!"

"Yes, fer we's anxious ter go, an' won't
e, and no bluffin'," chimed in the third
esperado, with a menacing motion of his
stol-armed hand.

ay "But who are you, and what do you

want with me? Speak out, men, and
plainly, for I am not one to stand
trifling!"

"Oh, Lawd! Jest hear him crow!"

"An' we'uns with a pistol grip thet
means death ef we crooks a finger!"

"Dead game, shore enough, but with
nary a chainece ter sink gaff or beak!"

Reading aright that grim badinage,
Yorke hesitated no longer, but leaped
forward, and the pick descended, graz-
ing the head of the nearest ruffian and
sending him down with a broken shoul-
der.

But the force of the blow shattered the
handle of the implement, and before the
Englishman could throw it aside and
draw the revolver from the holster at
his hip the remaining desperadoes were
upon him, raining merciless blows on his
head with heavy pistol butts.

Half stunned, weakened by that cow-
ardly assault, Yorke yet struggled game-
ly, and succeeded in thrusting a quickly
drawn knife through the arm of an as-
sailant.

"Look alive, pard!" screamed the fel-
low, slipping aside and frantically grasp-
ing the disabled member. "Look alive!
Ther cuss hes a knife!"

But at that moment the Englishman
went down beneath a vicious blow.

"A fine job we've made, too!" the
leader growled, with a rueful look at his
disabled aids. "All due to ther boss's
soft heart, too, for he sh'ud 'a' said kill,
not capter!"

"Wuss luck us he didn't!" groaned
the fellow on the ground.

"Jes' so! But you git up, Hanson.
We've got ter move, I'm tellin' ye, fer
this hain't no place fer a hoss-pital!"

Slowly, then, and with muttered an-
athemas upon his ill luck, Hanson strug-
gled to his feet, while the leader secured
and disarmed the unconscious English-
man.

"Now, for'ard, you cripples, an' take
ther bend-about way. I'll foller soon es
this galoot opens peepers. Strike shale
and naked hardpan often as ye kin.
Tain't nowise likely thar'll be pursuit,
but 'twon't do no good ter leave a broad,
deep trail, ye understand."

"C'rect, Black Jack, an' we's off now.
But you take keer yer pet grizzly thar
don't sink claws—"

"Oh, button lip an' skip, Kid Bounce!
Let be ther ole man, won't ye? real
take keer o' hisself, never fear! Now git
—all two o' ye!"

Impatiently spoke the leader, for he
knew that at best the wounded men
would make slow progress. In haste to
get under cover himself, he dared not
leave them behind, so deemed each min-
ute precious, just then.

"A likely pa'r o' cripples ter fall heir
to jest when ther coin was startin' my
way!" he grumbled, glaring after the re-
treating men. "Mebbe, though, ther
boss'll come down with an extra hundred
when he sees by what a scratch we win
out!"

Solacing himself with that faint hope,
Black Jack bent over his captive, and
with no unskilled hands began the work
of resuscitation. Yet, it was fully an
hour before Edwin Yorke awoke to con-
sciousness.

"Sorry, ole pard, thet ye got sech a
thumpin', but ye w'ud hev it 'so," the
rough explained, smiling grimly into the
Englishman's wondering face. "Come—
git up, now, an' we'll puckachee."

"But—where?"

"Right ter ther den—my den! Thar's
a fine-haired gent as wants ter meet ye
thar this night."

"You were hired, then—"

"Mighty shore, boss! An' ther pay
was in yaller boys galore. But don't put
wrinkles in yer face fixin' up questions
ter ax, barcoz 'tain't nowise sartain ye'll
git answers ter suit. See?"

"I understand, yes. But how much—"

"A hull shinin' heap, o' course! We
ain't no cheap trash!"

"But, if I knew just how much, man—"

"Ye'd buy, too, eh? Jest ease up on

thet 'ar p'int, pardner! I've heer'd say
thar's a book somewhar es sez a man
cain't sarve two masters. An' et's putty
nigh true, too. Anyway, et fits this hyar
case. Ye see, ther gent I'm alludin' to is
a reg'lar joss on wheels, an' I ain't
p'tic'lar anxious fer him ter make me
chief attraction fer a funeral. An' he
jest w'ud, pardner, ef he caught me with
an ounce o' your dust in my weasel-
skin!"

Reading that half-mocking, half-ear-
nest strain aright, Edwin Yorke, smoth-
ering both hope and indignation for the
time being, lapsed into silence, and plod-
ded slowly onward beside his captor.

Within an hour Kid Bounce and his
companion were overtaken, and for two
or three miles the party moved forward
at a yet slower pace.

Then Black Jack knotted a neckerchief
over his captive's eyes, and shortly there-
after the bluff overlooking the wooded
valley was reached.

But Yorke was familiar with every
crook and turn in the hills thereabouts,
and as soon as the party began the de-
scent into the valley he knew just where
he was.

"They are taking me to the hidden
dugout," he told himself, when assured
that the course lay down the valley.
"These fellows, then, must be the Out-
law Miners of whom I have heard, for
'tis said the dugout is their rendezvous."

"But who can be the man who has
hired them to do this deed? Surely, not
the chief of the men encamped in the
Lost Mine basin, lest, indeed, he wishes
to strike with a hidden hand."

"Ah, well! I soon shall know, and if
the adventure brings not peril upon poor
Mona, I shall be well content to escape
with life."

That Yorke's surmise was correct, the
course taken by the desperadoes proved,
for a mile below the bluff the party
turned at right angles, forded a slug-
gish stream, and crossed the valley to the
opposite slope, where, hidden away in a
dense growth of young timber, was the
dugout.

Two men, rough looking and thorough-
ly armed, lounged in the shade before the
open door of the gruesome den, and both
sprang quickly to their feet as Black
Jack and his crew appeared in the nar-
row path penetrating the timber.

"Ho, pards! Ye've bin a long time
gone!" hailed the foremost, moving into
the path to meet the party. "Suff'rin'
Caesar! men, what's happened ye?"

"Struck a reg'lar wildcat, fer a fact,
Dick! Hanson's got a broken shoulder,
an' ther Kid a clean gash through the
arm."

"Suff'rin' suff'rin's! But, pards, ther
boss warned us ther critter was dan-
gerous—sed ter strike fu'st an' parley
afterwards."

"That's true, Dick. But ther boys
wanted some fun, an' they got it!"
grimly.

"Now, you an' Mike take ther critter
inside—stow him in ther pen an' bar ther
door."

That Black Jack was in full authority
at the dugout, the actions of the two
outlaws at once attested, for both sprang
forward in prompt obedience.

Yorke listened attentively to all that
was said. He offered no resistance when
led away, but deep in his heart was a de-
termination to escape.

Dick and Mike soon emerged from the
dugout, and under the chief's orders gave
such care and attention to the wounds
of Kid Bounce and Hanson as circum-
stances would permit.

Then food was prepared, and all fell
to with a gusto which bespoke appetites
of almost savage sharpness. The meal
ended, pipes were lighted, and the Out-
law Miners, lolling about at ease in the
grateful shade, discussed the morning's
adventure in every detail.

Late in the afternoon Black Jack or-
dered Dick to saddle up.

"One o' us got ter go in an' report ter-

night, an' I reckon ye're ther one fer ther trip, Dick," he said. "Tell ther boss jest what et cost us ter turn ther trick, an' hint thet I'm a-swearin' ther pay ain't none too plentiful."

"C'rect, ole man—I'll do jest thet, an' in a mighty fetchin' way, too."

"Any word fer our pards over thar?"

"On'y es ye now know."

Overjoyed at the chance thus opened for a trip to town, Dick danced nimbly away, and a moment later reappeared, leading his horse.

Before he could mount, however, a lithe, wiry little outlaw suddenly darted out of the path and confronted the group.

"Hey, Black Jack! Thar's a galoot over on ther bluff, runnin' down yer trail," he announced, shrilly, his hands trembling with excitement. "A reg'lar army scout, too, an' bad medicine, er I'm a jumpin' jingo!"

"Only ther one, Skinny?"

"Yas, but—"

"Button lip, then, ye bag o' bones!"

"Ride on, thar, Dick, but keep under kiver. We'll 'tend ter ther spy. We'll give him an ambush, right at ther crick ford."

CHAPTER XXIX.

WATCHING THE DUGOUT.

Pawnee Bill was too wary to be caught completely off his guard by the Outlaw Miners in ambush. Unharmful by the volley, he sank in the dense growth of reeds bordering the little stream, while a shrill yell of defiance rang from his lips.

He had detected that cunning ambush not a breath too soon to save himself and horse. A slight swaying of the reeds on the opposite bank—a fleeting glimpse of Black Jack's grizzled face, and he knew the truth.

"Steady, now, good Starlight!" he muttered, a moment later, affectionately patting the glossy neck of the prostrate steed. "Don't move, don't stir, till you hear me call. Play dead, and I'll drive those rascals out."

Surely, there was perfect understanding between man and horse, for the shapely head sank down, the eyes closed, and the death feint was well-nigh perfect.

Cautiously, then, the quarter-blood stole through the brake, rifle in hand, each motion so sinuous, so serpentine, that scarcely a member of that reedy growth was shaken enough to betray his movements.

Down beside the stream he glided, into a roomy covert overlooking the opposite bank, and crouched low behind a screen of rushes bordering the shallow water.

At that moment Black Jack's harsh voice, subdued, yet distinctly audible, greeted the ears of the trailer.

"We shore got both man an' critter, pards," the Outlaw Miner was saying. "The trail sharp was keen enough ter glimpse us, yet a bit too late ter dodge our lead. Jes' slip acrost thar, Skinny, an' take a peek through ther tangle, will ye?"

"Lawd! Jack! 'Tain't my fun'ral, an' I ain't takin' chainces ter make et so!"

"Aw, go on, now. Ther critter's dead, fast enough."

"Say he is, then! But dead or possum-in', 'tain't manners fer me ter putt myself for'ard so!"

"Mike, you go."

"Dassen't, Jack! I promised me pore—"

"Cowards, both o' ye!" snarled the chief, in a rage. "Don't I tell ye we drilled ther galoot plum shore? I'll go myself!"

A brace of jeering laughs followed the threat, showing that neither outlaw possessed much faith in his leader's courage just then.

Stung into a semblance of reckless daring, Black Jack sprang to his feet and quickly parted the bushy screen; but ere he could step forth a rifle shot rang out, a bullet grazed his ear, and with a

yelp of terror he turned and fled, with his more cautious pards at his heels!

Shot after shot rang out, urging on that hasty flight, then with a taunting yell Pawnee Bill leaped to his feet and hastened back to his horse.

Assured, now, that he had nothing to fear for the present from the fleeing rogues, the quarter-blood ordered Starlight to rise, mounted, and rode rapidly up the valley.

A mile above the bluff he forded the little stream, turned his horse loose, and under cover of the deepening twilight hurried toward the scene of his recent encounter.

"They've got a camp or a den somewhere near, and there Yorke will be found," he told himself, as he glided along, with every sense on the alert. "If I can spot the place, and make sure the Englishman is there, I'll ride back to the cabin and await the party Mason was to send out."

On nearing the point at which the trail crossed the stream, Pawnee took cover, and patiently waited until the dense gloom of night lay over the valley, ere venturing on.

No sound came to warn him of the proximity of foe, yet he knew they were somewhere near.

Creeping out of the rushes, at length, he pushed on across the level, and ascended a tree near the foot of the slope.

"They must have a light of some kind, wherever they are," he muttered. "If I can get high enough above the tangle to glimpse it, the rest will be easy."

So, to a position near the top of the tree he clambered, slowly and noiselessly, and there made himself as comfortable as possible, for no ray of light shone out of the sea of gloom around him, and he realized that he must play a waiting game.

Thus an hour passed away, then another, without a sound to tell of man's presence in the surrounding wilds, or a gleam to relieve the impenetrable darkness, and Pawnee prepared to descend.

"They're holed up, hard and tight, for the night, I reckon," he growled, in disgust. "Well—"

That was all, just then. A door opened not a hundred yards away—a broad belt of light flashed over tree and thicket.

An instant thus, then all was dark again.

"Holy smoke! Look at that, now! And me so close I should have smelled them! That's the den, fast 'enough! But—is the old man there?"

Swinging clear of his perch, the quarter-blood carefully lowered himself to the ground, tightened his belt, and crept off toward the dugout, treading the thicket with catlike stealth.

Then he came upon the path, and glided on to the open space before the door. There, his progress stopped.

A shadowy form rose before him, and in another instant he was grappling with an unknown foe.

By sheer luck, Pawnee's hand met the fellow's throat, and closed in a desperate clutch. Then his rifle butt rose and fell, and the Outlaw Miner lay silent and motionless in his grasp.

Listening a moment, to assure himself that the sounds of the brief struggle had not alarmed the inmates of the dugout, the trailer raised the senseless outlaw to his shoulders, and hastened along the path and out of the thicket.

"Here's a pretty pass," he muttered, as he at length stopped beneath a tree and put down his burden. "What shall I do with this fellow? He'll be very much alive in a few minutes, and if he succeeds in giving the alarm there'll be no more scouting here to-night."

Then another thought occurred to him. Removing the captive's cartridge belt and weapons, he again hoisted him to his shoulders, and moved on to the creek.

There, a few dashes of water revived the outlaw, and as he struggled to arise Pawnee pressed the point of a knife against his throat.

"Be silent!" he hissed. "Utter a sound or make a move without my permission, and it shall be the worse for you."

"Remain as you are, answer my questions, and obey my orders, and 'twill be the better for you."

"Don't k-kill me!" stammered the wretch, none other than Skinny. "On'y give me a chaince—"

"Sh-h! Stop that! Get upon your feet. Don't try to run, or you'll get this knife in your back. There—steady, bo! Now, forward—march!"

With hand gripped firmly on collar, Pawnee fairly swung the captive around, facing up stream, and forced him along, step by step, until he had reached a point near where he had left his horse.

There, a signal whistle brought the intelligent animal cantering up, and with a picket rope taken from the saddle horn the trailer quickly secured his captive.

"Now, we're ready for business," he grimly announced, squatting directly before the fellow, knife in hand. "I want you to tell me all about that shebang back there."

"Oh, Lawd! They'll kill me ef I tells!"

"As will I if you don't tell! So, old boy, you're between the Old Nick and the deep sea—a sure result of villainy!"

"Come, now! What's your name?"

"Skinny, they calls me, boss."

"Well, Skinny, you're in a tight fix!"

"Oh, yas; an' I wishes I was out, too."

"A useless wish, for you'll never—"

"But—ef I do tell, boss?" eagerly.

"All depends on what you tell, man. A parcel of lies won't save you. A straight story may."

"I'd tell straight es a string, boss, ef I war sure—Deuce take em! I never was in favor o' ther job, anyway!"

"What job, Skinny?"

"Corralling old man Yorke."

"They did it, then?"

"Oh, yas. We Outlaw Miners, es they calls us, hired out ter a Crystal City galoot ter run him in, an' we jest did, too."

"Where is he?"

"At the dugout."

"How many Outlaw Miners are there?"

"Thar's four, but two's bad hurted an' don't count fer much."

"But don't ye tackle 'em, boss, 'less ye got a pass good at ther main gate o' ther happy huntin' grounds, fer I tells yer they're p'ison, an' then thar's others nigh."

Pawnee laughed softly. Then, after a moment's reflection, he looked carefully over the prisoner's bonds, and fashioned a rude gag, and forced it between his jaws.

"I'm going back to see if your story's straight, Skinny," he explained. "If I find you've told the truth, I'll turn you loose as soon as this business is done."

A muffled groan was the only response. Picking up his rifle, Pawnee spoke to his horse, then turned and hastened toward the dugout.

Arrived at the thicket, he slipped cautiously along the path to the small cleared space in front of the hovel. A moment's listening convinced him that the outlaws inside had not yet taken alarm at Skinny's prolonged absence, and he crept around to the foot of the sloping, earth-covered roof.

He knew that there was a hole at or near the apex to permit the escape of smoke and foul air from within, and through this hole he expected to see and hear all that passed inside.

The roof was formed of saplings laid from the side walls to the ridge pole, and covered with sod and earth, and he knew that he would have to move with great stealth to prevent discovery.

He made the ascent, however, without discovery, and through the aperture obtained a clear view of the interior. Everything tallied with Skinny's story, save that Yorke was nowhere visible.

For upward of an hour the spy held his position, listening closely to the ran-

dom talk below. Then a number of horsemen suddenly appeared in the cleared space in front of the dugout. A moment later, the door was thrown open, and two captives were pushed into the dismal hovel.

They were Mona Yorke and Mignon Verne.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE SHARP'S ADVENTURE.

When Fiddling Dan and his men rode away with Adrain Yorke, immediately after the Telegraph Sharp's reckless dash to the rescue of Shadrach Mason, their course was anything but a direct one, and they fairly circled the little town ere striking into the Gilt Edge trail.

Dan and his pards had taken possession of the den of the late Captain Karl, the Trail Robber, in the hills near Gilt Edge, and it was their intention, under instructions from Sheriff Wilkins, to keep Adrain Yorke in hiding there until such a time as he could be returned to the Crystal City jail with safety.

All was jollity and mirth among the deputies as they cantered slowly onward, although every man of the rough crew was heartily in sympathy with the prisoner, for his bold stand before the mob had been one to win both admiration and friendship.

But the Sharp rode onward in silence beside Fiddling Dan, at the head of the column, for his thoughts were not of the present, but of the past, and he was vainly trying to solve the riddle of Collins's death.

When nearly two miles below town, a cry of alarm from a deputy in the rear caused all to draw rein, while a sudden hush fell upon the party.

"Hark, pards! Do ye hear that? We are pursued!"

Not loudly, but clearly, that cry rang out, and the grim silence following was quickly broken by the clatter of hoofs on the stony trail in the rear.

"Stiddy, pards!" called Dan, quick to evolve a plan. "Thar's a dry canyon jest ahead. Move up, an' we'll slip in thar, an' so dodge both footrace an' fight."

This proposition met with general favor, and in another minute the little cavalcade was again in motion.

The canyon in question was the one through which we have seen the sport-detective and Mona Yorke escape from the Lost Mine basin. It was near at hand, and in an incredibly short time the posse was securely sheltered between its frowning walls.

Scarcely had the horses been brought to a stand, however, when the pursuing party swept past the mouth of the rift, riding at a speed wild and hazardous for that rough, dark trail. Then:

"Help! Help!"

It was a woman's voice, ringing, clear, and full, yet fraught with deadly terror and despair!

"By heavens! That was my sister's voice!" cried Yorke, in a quick, sharp tone. "Forward, men! Those fiends have captured her!"

"Ay! forward!" thundered Fiddling Dan. "Out, now, lads, an' at 'em!"

Little need to urge haste, just then! With hoarse mutterings and a fierce jangling of spurs every man pushed forward. Yet, when the canyon's mouth was reached the fleeing party was gone—sweeping along at a killing pace far down the trail!

Through keen, quick work the Telegraph Sharp was first to win clear of those frowning walls, and a merciless use of his spur sent his spirited horse plunging down the trail far in advance of the deputies.

With lips grimly compressed, eyes staring straight ahead, and ears straining to catch the faintest sound floating back in the gloom, onward he sped. Slowly, the distance between himself and the deputies widened, and yet he barely held his own with the fleeing roughs!

A groan escaped him. Again was the

rowel of his spur stained with crimson. Would that frightful space never grow less?

On—on, over that rough and winding way sped the steeds of the pursued and the pursuer, with a certainty of foothold that seemed little short of miraculous. Then—

A sound akin to a curse burst from the tightly drawn lips of the Sharp. With a desperate effort he checked his steaming horse, and bent his head to listen.

All was silence and gloom ahead—dead, blank silence, dense, impenetrable gloom!

"In ambush, or—yes, by heavens! They have left the trail and taken to the hills!"

"Forward, Hector! And miss them not, or all is lost!"

Again the rowels urged the spirited animal to his best, and he bounded down a long slope with the speed of the wind, then clattered across the stony bed of a stream, wheeled at right angles with the trail, and darted away across the sward of a narrow valley.

"Easy, now, poor fellow!" muttered the Sharp, for the first time in that mad chase gripping rein to slack speed. "Easy, now, good Hector, for—There they are!"

True enough! Not two hundred yards ahead were the outlaws, slowly forcing their way through the dense undergrowth which covered the greater part of the valley, and in another minute the Sharp had entered that reedy brake.

Giving his horse free rein to pick the way, Yorke listened intently as they forged ahead, step by step.

The outlaws were talking and laughing. Evidently they were ignorant of the pursuer's presence, and seemed to have little dread of pursuit.

Presently the party emerged from the brake, and rapidly crossed an open space of considerable extent, then halted on the border of the thicket surrounding the dugout.

Here three of the men dismounted. The captives were quickly lifted from their saddles, and in response to a word of command, the horses were hurried away by two of the party who had not alighted.

At that moment the Telegraph Sharp won clear of the brake below; but, owing to the distance and the darkness, he failed to detect this division of the outlaw force. The trampling of hoofs assured him they were yet in flight somewhere ahead; he hurried onward across the open.

Continuing a hundred yards up the valley, the men in charge of the horses turned and ascended the slope to the foot of a bluff, where they dismounted and led the animals through a sinuous passage and into a cavern.

Three men were there, members of the Outlaw Miners, seated beside a crackling fire, and all sprang up as the new-comers entered.

"Hallo!" exclaimed the foremost of the trio. "What luck, pards?"

"Fine! We brung ther gals away, an' no one's the wiser. They're both over at ther house, now."

Various exclamations greeted this announcement. Then the horses were hitched to a rude rack running along one wall of the cavern, and the five men seated themselves around the fire.

Meanwhile, the Telegraph Sharp had passed the thicket in time to detect that change of course before the outlaws entered the cavern. Guided by voices and the sounds from the horses, he followed as closely as possible.

Arrived at the foot of the bluff, Yorke was not long in discovering the cave. Retreating a short distance, he hid his horse, crept up the slope, and stealthily entered that winding corridor leading to the den.

A moment of cool and cautious work sufficed to win for him a clear and unobstructed view of the interior, and he drew back in alarm and amazement.

His sister was nowhere visible.

"And yet, I could swear, almost, that they came directly here," he mused. "But she is not there. Every inch of those frowning walls is distinctly visible in the glow from the fire, and there is not a break in them."

"Can it be that my ears deceived me—that it was not Mona's voice I heard?"

"No! The poor child is somewhere near, and I shall find her, or leave red work for these devils to remember!"

Eyes glittering with baleful light, every muscle set for swift and deadly work, the Sharp again crept up to that rocky angle and peered around the cavern.

Keenly, he eyed those grim, smoke-stained walls. They were without break or fissure. Every angle, every turn, was flooded with yellow light from the glowing fire, and nothing was concealed.

Then, crouching low, he listened to the rude jests and boisterous talk of the outlaws, until he had learned there was a dugout near, and that a portion of the party had stopped there.

Cautiously drawing back, the Telegraph Sharp rose and hastily retraced his steps to the outer air. A moment's reflection convinced him that he had passed the dugout in the darkness, and he stole quietly along the slope above the thicket.

A hundred yards thus, then a long-drawn breath of relief escaped him.

Directly below was a round, irregular glow of light, and he knew that he was gazing at the smoke hole or flue of the dugout.

Stealthily, he crept downward. In another minute he was upon the sloping earthen roof. The hum of voices came from below. Moving forward, he stooped to apply his ear to the aperture.

Just then a powerful hand clutched his throat, and the next instant he was engaged in a deadly hand-to-hand struggle with an unknown foe.

Shouts and cries of alarm came from below. The roof creaked, groaned, and crumbled under the combined weight of the combatants. Then a portion gave way, and the two men were precipitated into the midst of the startled outlaws!

CHAPTER XXXI.

FIDDLING DAN TAKES A HAND.

A cloud of dust, rising from the debris, partially obscured the light for a moment, and shrouded the scene in semi-gloom.

"Furies! Pards, et's a spy!" yelled Black Jack, quickly whipping out a weapon and retreating to the wall. "Guard ther door, thar! Don't let 'im escape!"

The order was hastily obeyed. Then, as the haze lifted, it was seen that both men lay silent and motionless, just as they had fallen, and a chuckle of delight came from the chief of the Outlaw Miners.

"Cracky! boys, thar's two of 'em—both spies!" he called. "Clean jarred out o' their wits, too! Nail 'em both now, or they'll make cold meat fer funerals by an' by!"

There was little need for that command, however, for ere it was fairly spoken the outlaws were dragging at the senseless forms, eager to see just whom it was fate had so unceremoniously flung into their hands.

And recognition came swift and sure, for after one glimpse of the nearer face Dean Bendabuck started back in amazement, crying:

"Ther Telegraph Sharp, pards, for one! Harness him, shore, fer thar's a fat price on his head!"

"Yas, an' t'other's Pawnee Bill—no less!" echoed Bunco Bill, in like amazement. "Glory, pards! This is luck!"

Other cries rang out from the excited, jubilant outlaws, but Black Jack quickly moved forward and brought order out of chaos, silencing all and bringing the task in hand down to a businesslike method.

Though sorely puzzled to account for

that struggle on the roof, he felt that there must be others near, awaiting the reports of the two spies, and he did not care to be caught with them in his keeping just then.

A few curt words served to explain as much, and amid silence the two men were pulled from the wreckage, disarmed, and securely bound long before consciousness returned.

A brief examination served to show that no bones had been broken by that luckless fall, then both were hastily borne from the dugout.

That done, the wreckage was cleared away as quickly as possible, and a sheet of old canvas stretched over the hole in the roof.

A messenger was dispatched to the cave to summon the men there, and on their appearance all sat down to a council of war.

Not until Black Jack ran his eyes over the assembled group was the absence of Skinny discovered.

Then question and answer fell thick and fast, but no one had seen the ruffian after he left the dugout earlier in the night, and his whereabouts remained a mystery.

"They've got him!" declared Black Jack, in a tone of fear. "Boys, we cain't rest till we know fer shore. He's one o' ther weak-kneed sort, an' will peach ef hard pushed.

"Three o' ye go up ther valley, an' three down. Beat through ther bresh two or three miles both ways. Ef thar's a party in camp, ye'll shore strike et. See, then, ef they've got Skinny. If they hev', ye'll find us ready ter pull our freight when ye git back."

The course thus suggested met with the approval of the roughs. Two parties hastily formed and departed.

It was growing light in the east when the first crew returned, brining with them Skinny and the horses of Pawnee Bill and the Telegraph Sharp. The outlaws at the dugout all breathed freer at sight of the lean little ruffian, and the tale he told went far to reassure them.

Shortly thereafter the second party came in. They reported a band of men in camp on the Gilt Edge trail, at the foot of the valley. Who or what they were the scouts had been unable to learn.

"We'll know soon enough, I guess," ventured Black Jack. "Boys, git these horses an' ther critters ther gals rode under kiver at once. We've got a mighty good grip on ther game yit, an' we'll foolish thet squad, ef et comes this way."

Passing over events at the dugout for a brief time, let us take a look at the party camped on the Gilt Edge trail.

As the reader has doubtless surmised, these men were Fiddling Dan and his outfit. Unable to keep pace with the impetuous Telegraph Sharp, the giant and his deputies had reached the valley ford too late to detect the course of the fleeing horsemen by ear, and, fearful of missing Yorke on his return in quest of help, they decided to go into camp at the ford, and await the coming of day.

So the horses were picketed, and guards set, and in a few minutes all was silent in the camp. Shortly before daybreak the men were aroused, the horses brought in and saddled, ready for a start at the first flush of dawn.

It was through listening to the conversation of the men during these movements that the spies lurking near learned that Skinny was not present, and they at once withdrew and reported, as we have seen.

As soon as it grew light, all saw that the trail led straight up the valley, and prominent among the hoofmarks was the print of the marked shoe worn by the Sharp's horse.

"He shore caught the turn an' follered close, lads," Fiddling Dan declared, uneasily. "I'm plum sorry we c'u'dn't keep even with him, fer ef he's struck thet outfit thar's bin trouble."

"An' he was game enough ter do jest

thet, Dan, ef his hoss held out," asserted the nearest of the men.

"Yas. But for'ard, boys. Don't spare whip or spur long es ther trace is plain."

With that, the cavalcade was off, in single file, with Fiddling Dan in the lead.

The trail was surely plain to eyes schooled to the work in hand, and with the aid of daylight the deputies forged ahead much faster than the outlaws had been able to go the night before, and just at sunrise they reached the thicket surrounding the dugout.

The restless brown eyes of the giant were quick to read the "sign" conveyed by the trampled earth, and he promptly pulled his horse aside, and flung up a hand.

"Stiddy, bo!—every man o' ye!" he called, in a cautious tone. "Ready fer business, now! Ther game's within smellin' distance, an' may flush!"

"This way, Rocky, boy!"

Swinging out of their saddles, the giant and the man addressed bent low over the trail a moment, then with a gesture of warning to the four mounted deputies silently set off around the border of the thicket.

Straight to the cavern in the bluff they followed those telltale prints. At the entrance they paused, and after a moment's whispered colloquy Dan stole forward alone.

The fire, freshly replenished, burned brightly in the chill cavern, and around it lay five men, all asleep or feigning sleep.

A glance told the spy that the Telegraph Sharp was not of the number, nor was his horse among those hitched to the rack across the cave.

Carefully, then, he eyed the rocky walls, much as Adrain Yorke had done some hours before, and with a like fruitless result.

"Nix!" he muttered, with a sniff of angry disgust. "Neither gal nor boy!"

Retracing his steps to the mouth of the passage, he quickly explained the situation to Rocky.

"But ther Sharp's bin hyar, boss, don't ye see?" that individual protested. "Thar's ther prent—ther marked prent thet nailed him fer ther Collins murder! Et leads straight ter ther foot o' this bluff. Ef ther Sharp ain't in sight, he's planted—thet's all!"

"So I think, lad. But come, let's make shore."

Patiently, then, the two men bent to the hoof-cut earth, picking out that telltale print and tracing it to the shrub to which Yorke had finally tied his horse.

But, there all trace ended!

"Now, boss, did he take wings and fly away, or did ther yurth open an' swally him up? You tell!"

"Neither one nor t'other, Rocky! Ther critter stood hyar long enough ter leave good, strong markin', then ther galoots took him away."

"But ther prents, boss! They stops hyar."

"They muffled his hoofs, Rocky! Thet's all. We'll go back an' hold a powwow."

With a sniff of disgust Rocky fell in behind his burly leader, and a moment later the pair rejoined the waiting horsemen, when the result of the reconnaissance was quickly made known.

"Thar's a deep game behind this, boys," Fiddling Dan declared. "Rocky, we'll reconnoiter ther thicket. They didn't stop hyar fer nothin'."

Beating along the border, it required but a moment to discover the hidden path, and as a result the entire party moved silently toward the dugout.

When the open space was reached, the posse found the dugout door shut, and everything as silent as the grave.

"Now, lads, keep yerselves ready fer business," continued Dan. Then, lifting his voice, he sharply hailed:

"Hallo! Hallo, ther house!"

No answering sound came from within, and with a grunt of impatience the giant strode forward and pounded heavily on the door with the butt of a revolver.

Then the sound of some one stirring within was heard, and a moment later the door opened, and Black Jack appeared.

He rubbed his eyes sleepily, and stared curiously at the crowd.

"Mornin', gents! What's up! What wanted?"

"We want ter search yer shack!" cried Dan, grimly.

"Come in, then. But you'll find nothin' in'. I've got a bad name, but I'm a honest man."

Without reply, Dan and Rocky pushed on into the dugout. By this time the other inmates were up, but no one offered any objection, and the search was speedily ended.

Not a clue to the whereabouts of the missing parties had been discovered!

CHAPTER XXXII.

DUNCAN SAUNDERS APPEARS.

When Shadrach Mason, the sport-detective, recovered from the unconsciousness produced by that deadly assault following his stolen interview with Orthodox Weeper, it was to find himself in a small log cabin.

And this cabin, as was afterwards proved, was a mile out of town.

The sport lay upon a rude cot in the darkest corner, bound hand and foot. Blankets, suspended from the rough timbers overhead, partially enclosed the cot and shut out the light from the single window.

For some minutes after reviving, he lay without moving a muscle, vaguely wondering where he was and striving to remember what had befallen him.

Then he recalled his interview with the conspirator, almost word for word ending with the abrupt appearance of British Bill and the murderous assault following.

A shudder convulsed the helpless sport and his heart chilled at the thought of the fate awaiting him. He had learned too much to be permitted to escape; the plotters could prevent it, he knew, and it required no second inspection of his bonds to assure him that every possible precaution to insure his safe keeping had been taken.

"I may as well face it like a man," he told himself. "They've got me foul, and all the repining in the world cannot alter the case a particle."

"I'm sorry, though, that I can't tell Ivan or Yorke all that I learned at the Lone Oak. Armed with that information they should make a speedy end to the case, and also to the plotters."

"But that is impossible now, and I can only await events. In the meantime, if a friendly fate decrees that I'm to have a chance, it shall not pass unimproved."

While thus musing, Shadrach had managed to turn himself upon his side, and now lay facing the blankets. The slight sounds occasioned by this movement quickly brought his keeper to his side.

As the fellow swept aside the blankets a flood of light, streaming through the window, fell upon the sport, almost blinding him; but he was able to make out a tall and powerful form, with a dark Indian-like face, and long black hair and mustaches.

"Wal, pard, how do ye find yerself?" the keeper asked, in a not unkindly tone. "Eat a bite, eh?"

"No, thank you; not now. What time is it?"

"Jest noon."

"How long have I been here?"

"Ye come last night."

"Who brought me?"

"Some friends o' mine."

"Orthodox and British Bill?"

"Ye've called et straight es string pard. But don't ax any more questions now. Et won't do ye any good."

"One moment! What do you get for keeping me here?"

"Money, pard—money! Round, gold, simoleons!"

"But how much?"

stirring mighty stack—a heap. I don't
 Jack ask ye kin top et, pard, ef thet's yer
 nd stare Have they paid you yet?"
 No; but they will."
 What You are mistaken."
 How so?"
 Warrants have been, or soon will be,
 ed against them for murder. If not
 under arrest, they will be before you
 I'm a get your money."
 he fellow looked startled.
 "Is that a fact, pard?" he demanded.
 Oh, yes! I am a deputy sheriff, and
 low whereof I speak. Those two men
 wanted for the murder of Darius Col-
 lins, for which the Telegraph Sharp
 le so near being lynched last night."
 Honest, pard?"
 Yes, truly. As the case stands, you'll
 e the money promised you. More than
 t, you're going to get into mighty se-
 port-dous trouble through holding me here."
 But I didn't know—"
 Makes no difference, that! Here—my
 mission is in my coat pocket. Take
 elf in out and see for yourself."
 With a crestfallen air, the man
 eyed, then said:
 "Pard, I'm sorry I'm in this pickle."
 Then take off these bonds."
 But ther money, pard—"
 How much was it?"
 A hundred."
 I'll give it to you, if you'll agree to
 as I say."
 An' thar'll be no trouble?"
 Not a particle."
 Wal, pard, I'm mighty jub'us, but I'll
 y ye. Yer story shore seems straight."
 In another minute the sport was free.
 word so tightly had been bound that
 nce e found it next to impossible to move
 about for the nonce; so while his erst-
 hile jailer was busily chafing the swol-
 sport's wrists and ankles, he continued:
 "What is your name, my man?"
 "Dandy Blake, sir."
 Well, Dandy, what got you into this
 knewfair? Didn't you know it was crooked
 ion and would make trouble?"
 "No, sir. Ye see, I'm a miner, an' I've
 keepin' playin' in mighty tough luck o' late.
 When them chaps brought ye hyar last
 n, hight, they said ye was mixed up in ther
 l, an' Collins murder, an' thet they wanted ye
 t althet hyar till ther excitement died
 low'n."
 "So—ho! That was the game, eh?"
 "Yas. They believed ye guilty, but
 ation wanted ye ter hev a fa'r trial, so warned
 o thme ter keep quiet an' say nothin' till
 they called fer ye."
 "When were they to come?"
 "Didn't set no time. On'y, they said
 have thar was a mob ag'in ter-night, they'd
 ved run ye in ther hills till ther trouble died
 hadown."
 "What a cunning pair they are! But
 Ththat will do now, Dandy. I believe I can
 novemake it now," and Shadrach again got
 o hi upon his feet, and walked slowly to and
 fro.
 "Yes, yes, I'll be all right soon," he
 th continued, after a moment.
 "Now, Dandy, I want to get to the
 mak sheriff's office, and I want to go in such
 lark guise that those rascals will not recog-
 nize me if they are still at large and see
 me. Let me have some of your old
 clothes, please."
 "They're putty old, pard, fer a fact,
 but I reckon ye kin hev them."
 "It's all the better if they're old and
 ragged."
 The miner crossed the room to a bat-
 tered trunk in the corner. From it he
 drew a pair of coarse top boots, a pair
 of ragged trousers, a red flannel shirt,
 and a felt hat.
 "Rainy day togs," he grinned, as he
 placed the various articles at the sport's
 disposal.
 "Just what I want," Shadrach assured,
 and then he hastily made the change.
 With the old clothes on, he carefully
 tucked his long hair up under his hat,
 then gouged a lump of clay from the
 chinking in the wall, moistened it, and
 daubed his face and hands.

"Lordy, pard! Yer own mammy
 w'u'dn't know ye!" cried Dandy, delight-
 ed with the complete metamorphosis.
 "Ye don't look like no dandy sport now
 —not fer a cent!"

Then Shadrach departed. He walked
 briskly into town, and went direct to
 Sheriff Wilkins's office.

That officer was in. He was seated at
 a desk, and there was a dark frown on
 his face. He looked up slowly as that
 odd-looking figure shuffled into the room
 and stood before him.

"Well, my man, what is it?"

"Oi do be lookin' fer wurruk, sor!"

"Work, eh?"

"Yis, sor, an' I do be naldin' av it, too,
 yer 'onner!"

"Oh, you get out! There's no work
 here! Go look elsewhere."

"Shure, yer riverance, Oi'll do dhat
 same, phwen—"

"Well, go; don't bother me."

"But phwat dhe—"

"Rot! rot! Go down to the mines.
 Tell them I sent you."

"Yis, but dhe job here? Begob—"

"What job, man?"

"Sure, dhe spalpeen tould me dhe sher-
 iff's black head nalded sharp—"

With a growl of anger, Sheriff Wilkins
 sprang to his feet and caught the in-
 truder by the arm.

But a hearty laugh from the disguised
 sport at once dispelled his anger, and he
 peered sharply at that grimy face.

"Mason!" he ejaculated, in amaze-
 ment.

"Exactly, sheriff!"

"But what does this mean? Where
 have you been? Sit down, man—explain
 yourself."

Quietly, the sport obeyed that pointed
 request, carefully explaining all that had
 occurred since he last saw the sheriff.

"The infernal scoundrels!" Wilkins
 exclaimed, when Shadrach finished his
 hurried recital. "Mason, we must gath-
 er them in!"

"Yes, as soon as practicable. There is
 much we must learn first, however."

"Yes, that is true. We must secure
 proof that will not fail to convict."

"But the girls must be our first care.
 They must be rescued to-night, and I
 shall depend upon you for assistance,
 sheriff."

"I shall give it gladly, Mason."

"But I have news for you, too." In
 scouting through the outskirts of town
 last night, Tarbutton came upon the self-
 styled seer, Ajah. The old fellow had
 slipped and fallen from a cliff in the
 darkness, and is fatally injured. There
 is something he wishes to tell concern-
 ing the Collins murder. He has been
 calling for you, and refuses to divulge his
 secret to any one else."

"I'll see him at once."

So saying, the sport arose.

"You will find him at Tarbutton's
 house," added the sheriff. "At his re-
 quest, he was conveyed there secretly.
 Wait a moment, and I'll show you the
 way."

Before the sheriff could close his desk,
 however, a firm step sounded at the door,
 and a tall, fine-looking man of middle
 age stepped quickly into the room.

"This is Sheriff Wilkins, I believe?"

"The same, sir," affirmed the officer.

"My name is Duncan Saunders, Mr.
 Wilkins. I am from Philadelphia, and
 am looking for a gentleman who signs
 himself Shadrach Mason."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A CONFERENCE.

The sport-detective started sharply at
 that announcement, then stepped for-
 ward and quickly said:

"My name is Mason, sir—Shadrach
 Mason, and I am the man you seek."

"Yes, Mr. Saunders, the gentleman is
 indeed Captain Mason, although now dis-
 guised beyond the recognition of his
 closest friend," Sheriff Wilkins assured,
 for he was quick to catch the expression
 of incredulity which had come upon the
 Philadelphian's face.

"Ah! a detective?"

"Hardly that, Mr. Saunders, although
 the fates seemed determined that I shall
 act as such in this Collins case."

"But I am indeed surprised, as well as
 pleased, to see you here, sir, for it was
 only two nights ago that I wired you, us-
 ing your Philadelphia address, as given
 me by Collins."

"Yes, Captain Mason; it indeed seems
 an incredible flight. But that message
 was forwarded to me at Helena, where I
 had been for several days, and I at once
 started for Crystal City."

"I was delayed en route, but am here
 at last, and anxious to clear up the mys-
 tery surrounding the deaths of Collins
 and McGowan."

"Are you at leisure?"

"Not exactly, Mr. Saunders, but I can
 spare time to tell you the little that has
 developed; so sit down, sir, and Sheriff
 Wilkins will assist in making the matter
 clear."

With a nod of approval, the sheriff
 quietly closed the office door, and then
 the three men sat down by the desk.

Shadrach at once plunged into his sub-
 ject, recounting the murder of Collins,
 the finding of the clues, the encounter
 with Ajah, the Seer, and subsequent
 events, clearly and distinctly.

"The crime was deliberate, and most
 carefully planned," he declared. "It was
 the intention of the plotters to remove a
 dangerous man from their path, and to
 secure the will of old Donald Craigie,
 then to fasten the deed upon Adrain
 Yorke, and so bring disgrace and death to
 him."

"Collins and McGowan came here in
 quest of the Cragland heirs. They found
 them in Edwin Yorke and his son and
 daughter. They learned that the Gypsy
 Donald Craigie, the son of Ishmael, was
 also here, and McGowan then proved a
 traitor to his trust, selling his secret to
 the false heir."

"To make all clear, I may say that
 Ishmael Craigie, the Gypsy half brother
 of Edwin Yorke, or Craigie, has been a
 much-wronged man, whose greatest sin
 has been intense selfishness. His father,
 the original Donald Craigie, really left
 a will devising Craglands to his younger
 son, Edwin, to whom by every moral
 right that estate belonged. But that will
 was lost, and was not found until long
 after the younger brother had turned his
 back to England."

"Honest himself, Ishmael Craigie at
 once decided to make full restitution, but
 his son, Donald—Orthodox Weeper, as
 we know him here—objected, and a quar-
 rel followed, with the result that the old
 man was spirited out of the country and
 into France, where he was placed in a
 private madhouse before he could make
 public the finding of his father's will."

"But his cunning was even greater
 than that of his son. He had hidden the
 will. It was not to be found, nor would
 he divulge its hiding place. Escaping,
 finally, from the madhouse, through the
 aid of his keeper—none other than Ivan
 Verne—he secretly returned to England,
 secured the document, employed Darius
 Collins to prosecute the search for Edwin
 Craigie, and placed the will in his hands
 for safe keeping."

"Collins, in turn, engaged McGowan as
 his assistant, and the two sailed from
 England. They sought you out, Mr.
 Saunders, in Philadelphia, and to you
 divulged their errand."

"They did, sir," Saunders declared.
 "I may add, Mr. Mason, that the story,
 as you are telling it, is absolutely cor-
 rect, save in a few minor and unimpor-
 tant particulars."

"May I ask where you obtained your
 information?"

"Through inference, sir, drawn from
 several sources. Guesswork, we'll call
 it, although I am assured I am not far
 wrong."

"Indeed, you are marvelously near the
 truth, Mason. But, proceed with your
 guesswork, pray."

The sport laughed.

"Very well, Mr. Saunders. I will now hazard the assertion that you were unable to give them any information concerning Yorke's whereabouts."

"That is true, save that I had heard he was in Montana somewhere."

"Yes; they came to this State—then Territory—and began the search. To facilitate matters, Collins and McGowan separated, and it fell to the latter to discover the heirs."

"In the mean time, Ishmael Craigie, much shattered and broken in mind and in health, had followed his detectives, and was secretly keeping a close watch on their work."

"Ishmael's son, Donald, had also obtained an inkling of what was up. In company with a Gypsy friend, known as Roebuck, but here called British Bill, he came to Crystal City, determined to keep an eye on affairs, and to secure the will, if possible; and as an aid to their desperate schemes, they organized the cohort known as the Secret Seven, as I have been informed by Ivan Verne."

"McGowan discovered their presence here, and, as I have stated, sold out to them, and agreed to lure Collins to a lonely spot, assassinate him, and secure the will."

"Meanwhile, Gypsy Donald had met Miss Mignon Verne, Ivan's daughter, and fallen desperately in love with her. But she was already pledged to Adrain Yorke, so rejected the Gypsy's advances. When he learned the truth, the fellow determined to rid himself of his rival, and in such a manner as would forever destroy Mignon's love for him."

"There, gentlemen, you have the motive for the cunning plot which has saddled the Collins murder upon Adrain Yorke."

"With the facts proven, it would establish a motive, surely," Sheriff Wilkins asserted. "But, then, the evidence, man—Yorke's absence from town, the footprints, the marked horseshoe, the locket, the blood-stained money, the pewter bullets, and the conversation overheard by Bendabuck and Ribsam—how on earth are you going to clear away all these proofs of guilt?"

"Ay, there's the rub, sheriff! All are elements of the cunning plot, but how to explain them—how to sweep them away—that's the question!"

Saunders shook his head gloomily. "I fear the poor boy is doomed," he averred, sadly.

"There is but one thing thus far that can be adduced to offset that chain of evidence," the sport admitted. "I have fully compared the gold links found in McGowan's pocket with the chain of the locket carried by Yorke, and there is not a shadow of a doubt that they came from the chain. This will tend to show that McGowan committed the crime and left the locket and other clues to fasten the deed on Yorke."

"That is a point, yes; but there must be much other evidence discovered in the Sharp's behalf before he may hope to be acquitted," the sheriff declared.

"In the mean time, he is safe, and we would better devote all our energies to the rescue of Edwin Yorke and the two girls."

The conversation was interrupted just then by a lusty knocking at the door, and the next minute Rocky, Fiddling Dan's most trusted aid, briskly stepped into the room.

"Howdy, gents!"

"Sheriff, I wants ter see ye a bit."

"Speak out, my man," invited Wilkins, quick to recognize the fellow. "These gentlemen are interested in the matter that brings you here. You have news from Fiddling Dan, I suppose?"

"You bet! An' et's a high ole time we're hevin, too! Some critters f'm town passes us on ther Gilt Edge trail last night. They hes a gal with 'em, an' Yorke swears et's his sister. He cuts loose, then, an' we loses him in ther runnin'."

"This mornin' we strikes trail, an'

runs et right ter ther shack o' ther Outlaw Miners, which same we sarches, an' also a cave nigh there, but no Sharp an' no gal does we find."

"Then Dan allows he'll shore watch ther place, an' he does, while three o' us goes over ter old man Yorke's cabin, ter meet Pawnee Bill, es agreed on last night. We gits thar k'rect, an' finds a pack hoss in the stable, but no Injun, so starts back."

"Over in ther valley we strikes trail ag'in, an' we sees et's ther Injun's. Then we comes ter whar he's hed a pris'ner, fer the sign's dead plain, an' a picket rope lays 'round cut ter pieces."

"We runs this trail right down ter ther shack, an' thar et ends. So we ag'in sarches both dens, an' finds nothin'. Then Dan, he, nacherly allows thar's su'thin' a heap crooked thar, or tharabouts, an' he up an' sends me over hyar ter demur with you."

Too startled by this intelligence to smile at the quaint phraseology in which it was couched, Sheriff Wilkins turned to the disguised sport, and nodded.

Reading that signal aright, Shadrach spoke:

"Did you see more than one girl with the outfit that passed you last night, Rocky?"

"We sees none 'tall, stranger, but we heurs one yelp as they goes by."

"And Yorke's horse, and that of Pawnee Bill—did you find them?"

"Nary. Thar is jest a mount fer each critter thar."

"How many in all?"

"Ten or twelve."

The sport reflected a moment. That he was puzzled all saw. Then, a peculiar gleam appeared in his dark eyes, and he turned to Wilkins.

"Sheriff, where is Ivan?"

"He and I spent the latter half of the night searching for you. This morning he got half a dozen men together and started into the hills to rescue his daughter."

"Then he is out of the question at present. But we must send help to Fiddling Dan."

"How many men?"

"A dozen, I should say."

"I will get them at once, Mason. I will go with them myself."

"Hold, sheriff! We must move secretly."

"Rocky, return to Dan. Tell him to leave a couple of scouts in the valley to watch the Outlaw Miners, and to fall back with the rest of his force. He would better cross the Gilt Edge trail, and make a secret camp in the lower valley. The sheriff and his men will join them there shortly after dark."

"I ketches, boss. I'll tell him jest thet."

"Anything more?"

"No."

"So-long, then."

In another minute, Rocky was gone.

Turning to Wilkins, Shadrach said:

"Sheriff, both Orthodox and British Bill are going to the rendezvous to-night. They have planned to seize Camp-Meeting Tom, carry him there, and force a marriage with the girls."

"We must move secretly, not to alarm them, for if there is no change in their plans we may bag the whole outfit before another day dawns!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AJAH'S REVELATION.

In a darkened room in the Tarbutton home lay the old man whom we have twice met and known as Ajah, the Seer.

Beside the couch on which he lay sat the grim old marshal, and a doctor hovered near; both knew that the sands of life were ebbing fast, for the death-dew stood upon that bold, dark brow.

Presently, the aged sufferer stirred, and a shudder convulsed his wasted form. His dark eyes opened; he raised his head slightly, and glanced quickly around the room.

"Has he come?" he asked, hoarsely.

"Not yet," Tarbutton made answer, for the twentieth time.

"He will come. I feel it. Let me no die until he appears and I have spoken."

Then the gray head sank back, the eyes closed, and the wrinkled face gleamed white and ghastly in the gloam.

On the preceding night, following that vicious struggle at the calaboose, Marshal Tarbutton awoke to consciousness and staggered out into the street, just as the mob beneath the Lone Oak dispersed.

By the light of the bonfires he saw that his friends had escaped, that a tragedy had been averted by the timely arrival of the sheriff and his men. Then, dazed yet by the blow which had deprived him of consciousness, he leaned against the darkened corner of a building, to await the return of Shadrach Mason and Ivan Verne.

Scarcely a minute had he stood thus when hurried steps approached, and Peter Ribsam darted past in the darkness, fleeing toward the outskirts of the camp.

"Halt!" shouted Tarbutton, duty rising above physical weakness. "Halt, or I fire!"

Alarmed by that stern hail, Ribsam glanced over his shoulder, then quickened his pace, running swiftly down the street.

In a moment the marshal was in pursuit. But the rough had all the advantage of comparative youth and a good start, and the chase was fruitless.

That is, fruitless so far as the recapture of the prisoner was concerned. In another way it led to a result far more important just then than the law's renewed possession of Peter Ribsam.

The chase had led among the rocks at the foot of the cliffs bordering the little town on one side, and there, on his return, Tarbutton came upon the bruised and bleeding form of Ajah, the Seer.

The old man was unconscious when found, but quickly rallied, and when he found himself in friendly hands readily told how the accident had occurred.

"They were searching for me during the early part of the night, and I had taken refuge in a small ledge cavern near the top of the cliff," he explained. "When the mob formed the hunters left, and I quitted the cavern, determined to escape while I could. But the scenes below agitated me; I lost my footing and fell."

"Ye need surgical attention at once," Tarbutton suggested. "I'll go git a doctor an' several stout fellows, an' we'll kerry ye over ter town."

"No, no! Do not leave me. They will return and make an end to my miserable life!"

"Who will?"

"My enemies."

"Who aire they?"

"I cannot tell you. Get me away from here—take me somewhere secretly. Then send for the sport, Shadrach Mason. There is something I would tell him."

"About ther Collins murder?"

"Yes; do not delay. I am wounded unto death."

"I kin carry ye. I'll take ye ter my house."

"Anyway—anywhere, so they do not find me."

Accordingly, Tarbutton lifted the wounded man in his arms, and, pausing anon to rest, bore him home. Then a doctor was summoned, and the marshal set out to find the sport.

Failing in his mission, the marshal took Raymond and Ivan into his confidence. Leaving them to prosecute the search for Shadrach, he returned home.

But the sport was not to be found, and when day dawned the trio were ready to give up in despair.

"Perhaps if we state the case plainly, we may induce the old man to talk," Raymond suggested.

The expedient was tried, but it failed. Ajah shook his head grimly, when they had explained the matter, and declared:

"No! He am mistal untold."

"Mason ruptible. earthly sec"

"And no shake the"

"These e the subject the mome"

"that da keenly at"

"He'll untold." et's migh

"At the sounded son, still into the"

"Ajah s He c eyes. "C"

"moment? With a ton gras the doct"

"Ajah s "Come mured, e would t to be sa"

"Silent ber, Sha I w Collins matter, will pre my nar have w crime t one wh yester"

"I re lam W He crime"

"I l to sav law I done, treat the g"

"K to the deter had s terre"

"I you, secu supe hopy ways up t Yorl rible man look son"

"bas tha no mo my se be no"

"Pa I do"

"P a d"

"Y t"

"No! He will come yet. I feel it! If I am mistaken, I shall die with my secret untold."

"Mason is a fearless man, and incorruptible. To him alone will I confide my earthly secrets."

And no argument could change or shake the moribund's determination.

These events of the recent past were the subject of the marshal's thoughts at the moment we introduce the reader to that darkened chamber, and he gazed keenly at that grim white face.

"He'll die, fast enough, with his secret untold," he mused. "Poor chap! But—let's mighty rough on Ad Yorke!"

At that moment, however, a step sounded at the door, and Shadrach Mason, still in his borrowed garb, stepped into the room.

Ajah started up.

"He comes!" he cried, with flashing eyes. "Gentlemen, will you retire for a moment? Leave us alone."

With a quick breath of relief, Tarbuton grasped the sport's hands, then with the doctor left the room.

Ajah sank back with a gasp of pain.

"Come, my son—sit down," he murmured, extending a thin white hand. "I would talk with you, and there is much to be said."

Silently clasping the proffered member, Shadrach obeyed.

"I want to speak to you, first, of the Collins murder; after that, of another matter," the moribund continued. "I will preface my remarks by stating that my name is Ishmael Craigie, and that I have withheld my knowledge of the crime through a natural desire to screen one whom I believed, until a late hour yesterday, to be my son."

"I refer to the man you know as William Weeper, or Orthodox."

"He with the gambler called British Bill and Sandy McGowan, plotted the crime. McGowan fired the fatal shot."

"I had gone to the scene of the murder to save Collins, but arrived too late. I saw McGowan search the body. That done, he leaped back into the covert, retreated to his horse, cast the locket on the ground, and fled."

"Knowing that it was their intention to throw the crime upon Adrain Yorke, I determined to obliterate the clues they had so cunningly arranged, but was deterred by your appearance on the scene."

"Later, if you remember, I intercepted you, using an electrical apparatus I had secured with which to work upon the superstitious fears of my supposed son, hoping thus to turn him from his wicked ways. But your prompt refusal to give up the locket proved my effort to screen Yorke vain, and I was forced to the terrible alternative of letting an innocent man hang, or of denouncing the one I looked upon as my son."

"You understand my position, Mason?"

"It was certainly a terrible one, sir."

"Yes, and it preyed upon me. But yesterday I learned that I had been basely imposed upon for many years—that out of revenge for my having renounced the Gypsy clan of which my mother was a member, they had stolen my son in early infancy, during my absence, and substituted a full-blood Gypsy boy instead. And that boy, Mason, is now William Weeper!"

"Sir, you startle me!"

"Ay! and I was startled—shocked! But with the scales fallen from my eyes I saw my course clear, and attempted to do my duty, but was balked."

"Yet, out of it all comes sweet recompense, for I have found a son—my son—a man, honest, brave, noble! Do you understand me, Mason?"

"I think so, sir, and I congratulate you, for the discovery must bring ease to a heart long suffering in secret."

"Ay! and joy!"

"But you do not understand me, lad, for I mean that you are my son—that you are Donald Craigie!"

Fairly astounded, the sport leaped to his feet.

"My God! That is impossible!"

"No! It is a proven fact! Sit down, boy; let me explain."

Dazed, bewildered by the startling declaration he had just heard, Shadrach mutely obeyed.

"You knew, boy, that you were not Hannibal Mason's son?"

"I knew that I was his son by adoption only. But a kinder, truer father never lived."

"True, boy! He was one of God's noblemen. He found you a homeless waif in England, brought you to this country, and adopted you."

"Your mother was a French lady, a sister of Ivan Verne. She died within a week of your birth. Ivan, at the time of my marriage, was at the head of the police department of Paris, but was shortly afterward compelled to flee and hide his identity under an assumed name, because of political intrigues in which he was involved. Driven by want, he became a keeper of a private madhouse in France, but later came to America."

"The papers explaining all are here, my son. They came to me by mail yesterday. They will satisfy you upon every point. Read them when time will permit; learn to regard me as your father, and all will be well."

Then the voice of the moribund sank to a lower key, and for a half hour he spoke rapidly.

Shadrach seemed greatly amazed, but his expression finally changed to one of absolute conviction. Father and son, after many years of separation, were at last reunited!

"Go, now, my son," spoke Ishmael Craigie, at length. "Do not let me detain you longer. See that each and all of your kinsmen are rescued. Bring them to me, and I will give you a father's welcome."

"But I fear to leave you, sir, just now!"

"Fear not! You will find me alive when you return!" was the firm response.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE PARSON'S CALLERS.

Shortly after the release and departure of his prisoner, Dandy Blake saw British Bill approaching the cabin.

"Oh, Lawd! I'm in fer a bullet bee, now! But I'll hev my gun ready, an' ef thet card sharp makes a try fer my skelp I'll shore warm him while he's at et."

Thus muttering, the miner covertly loosened the weapon in his belt, then rose from his seat in the doorway and advanced to meet the gambler, who was mounted.

"Well, Dandy, how goes it?" the latter hailed, drawing rein.

"Fa'r, pard—fa'r."

"Any trouble with the gentleman inside, yonder?"

"He's still es a mouse, sir."

"That's good. I expected he'd cut up badly."

"Oh, no. He's a decent sort o' chap, et seems."

"He is, indeed, or we'd never go to all this trouble to save him from the mob. But, Dandy, we'll send for him at nine to-night. The town's not safe for him, and we've decided to ship him across the hills."

"All right, sir. Suit yourself."

"And, Dandy, who was the man who just left your cabin?"

The miner started.

"Eh? Oh!" he stammered. "Why, thet was Steve Jenkins, my pardner."

"Didn't know you had a pard, Dandy."

"Oh, yas; he's bin away."

"Did he discover your prisoner?"

"On yer life, no! Look in there, pard. Ther bunk is hung with blankets."

"I see from here. Well, Dandy, be very careful. We don't want the poor chap lynched. And remember, we'll send two men for him at nine."

"All right. I'll shore be ready."

Then the gambler handed the miner some cigars, turned, and galloped away.

Dandy gazed after him with a sardonic grin on his comely face.

"Oh, yas! I'll be ready!" he muttered. "Es ther fu'st move, I'll jest slip inter town an' see Mr. Mason!"

Accordingly, the miner locked his cabin door and started across the hills to Crystal City, thus avoiding the open trail.

The way was rough and toilsome, and it was considerably more than an hour before he reached Sheriff Wilkins's office. Then, that official was absent, and for a moment Dandy was non-plussed.

But he knew that it would hardly do for him to move about the streets of Crystal City just then, so he decided to sit down and await, with the best grace possible, the appearance of the sheriff or the sport.

An hour went by ere a step was heard. Then Shadrach Mason stepped quickly into the office.

The miner greeted him with undisguised relief and delight, and at once explained his errand.

"At nine, eh? And two of them, you say? Well, Dandy, you've done well. As soon as Sheriff Wilkins comes I'll get three men to send back with you. Then when the fellows appear to-night capture them."

Dandy nodded.

"Thet will let me out, ah right," he remarked.

Then the sport-detective handed over the money he had promised the fellow, and both sat down to await the sheriff's appearance.

In the mean time a scene of interest to the reader had occurred in another part of Crystal City.

Parson Thomas Severn, or "Camp-Meeting Tom," as he was popularly called, lived in a neat cabin near the southern border of the town.

He was a man of middle age, tall, and of fine proportions. His eyes and long, straight hair were black, while his ruddy, smoothly shaven face was as brown almost as an Indian's.

His mission in the little frontier town was one of peace and good will, and he was admired and respected by the better class of citizens.

Late in the afternoon of that bright June day the parson was startled from a peaceful reverie by a brisk step at the cabin threshold, and when he looked up a gayly attired miner stood before him.

"Howdy, parson!" the visitor exclaimed, extending his hand. "Nappin'?"

"Thinking, my friend, thinking—pondering the uncertainties of earthly life and dreaming of the glories of the kingdom to come. But I do not recall your face, brother. You are—"

"Absalom Vettters, parson. I lives jest across ther county line on ther south, an' I don't often git inter Crystal City."

"You are welcome, Brother Vettters. Sit down, make yourself comfortable, and bide a while."

"No, parson; I'm on business. Ther fact is, I'm tired o' single blessedness, an' hev concluded ter tie up. An' I want you ter do ther splicin'!"

"Brother, I will oblige you, for 'tis said 'tis not good for man to be alone. When is the happy event to occur?"

"Ter-night."

"In Crystal City?"

"No; at my place ten miles south."

"I will go, brother. When shall we start?"

"I've got some business ter tend to fu'st, parson. Et may be night—"

"As you will, brother. But beware of the paths of the ungodly in this wicked town. You are about to enter upon a new estate, and should shun the haunts of the doomed and sin itself as you would the Evil One."

"Thank ye, parson. I'll be keerful."

"Do, brother."

Then the miner dropped a double eagle in the parson's hand, and departed.

Up the street he strode, followed by Camp-Meeting Tom's wondering eyes, then turned a corner and disappeared.

"Verily, I distrust that man," the parson murmured.

"I fooled ther gospel sharp," Vettters chuckled, with a backward glance; then, safe from the parson's eyes, he laid his course direct to The Mecca.

Orthodox and British Bill were awaiting him there, in an up-stairs room, and both eagerly started up as the fellow entered.

"Well?"

"You bet! I worked ther trick, pards, an' ther parson goes like a lamb ter ther slaughter. I foolished him completely, an' his eyes war big as sassers when thet twenty plunked in his fist."

"We're all right, then," Orthodox jubilantly cried, with an awkward shuffle. "You did well, Ab. But be careful now you do not spoil it all."

"Trust me, boss!"

"And start just as soon as it's dark, lad. We'll disguise ourselves and go at once, for I want to make that accursed Sharp sup sorrow!"

"Have a care you don't ruin all," interposed British Bill, coldly.

"How?"

"By leaving our affairs here without watch or ward."

"Nonsense! What have we to fear?"

"The old man!"

"Bah! That half-crazed dolt! You forget that I am his son! That fact will stay his hand, surely!"

"He may have learned the truth!"

Orthodox scowled.

"Why do you harp on him?" he snarled. "Are you weakening?"

"No! But you forget he was about to speak last night when my shot stayed his tongue. It points to something!"

"But he fled."

"We know not. I found his shattered storage battery and other traps in a crevice below the cliff. There was blood on the stones near by. I believe he is in hiding not far away."

"So be it, then! He cannot injure us, for to-night's stroke will bring revenge, fortune, and security. I am weary unto death of the dull part of a tradesman I have been forced to play so long, and shall hazard all on a single throw, to win or lose!"

"Fool! You invite the hangman's rope!"

"Better that than the canker of inaction! Better death to the body than death to the brain!"

"Well, have your way. But now, with the game fairly within our grasp, yet wanting but one false move to ruin all, it seems the time for coolness and deliberation."

"Ay! but we dare not delay. There are secret agencies at work against us, I am sure. It were better to hazard all than to delay longer."

"As you will. But if it comes to the worst, don't reproach me with failure."

Leaving the plotters thus, we will return to the parson.

When Absalom Vetter's retreating form had passed from view, Camp-Meeting Tom turned back into the cabin; but after a time he drew up a chair and sat down by the door.

That the worthy man was troubled was revealed by the expression on his face.

"I don't know what to think of this business," he told himself. "I did not like the look in that man's eyes. I much fear there is mischief afoot."

Then he stared thoughtfully at the gleaming double eagle.

"Gold! What is it man will not do for gold? Truly, it is a powerful lever among the ungodly. And—this looks to me very much like a bribe!"

Then hasty steps sounded without, and the stalwart proportions of the sport-detective cast a shadow within the cabin.

"Enter, brother!"

"By your leave, parson," and Shadrach crossed the threshold, drew up a chair, and sat down.

"Can I serve you, brother?"

"You can, sir, for I am after information which it is within your power to impart."

"Have you had a call to go anywhere in a ministerial capacity to-night?"

"Verily, brother, I have. A Mr. Absalom Vettters has summoned me to recite the marriage rite for him."

"Where do you go?"

"Ten miles south, just across the county line."

"Do you know the man, sir?"

"I do not."

"The lady?"

"Not even her name, brother."

"Parson, you have been entrapped to aid in carrying out a piece of consummate villainy!"

"I am not surprised. But, will you explain, brother?"

"Willingly, sir. Miss Mignon Verne and Miss Mona Yorke were abducted and carried into the mountains last night by a band of outlaws. Two of the men are determined to wed these maidens by force, and you have been called to solemnize the marriages."

"Sons of Belial! Say you so?"

"I have stated the case exactly, parson."

"Brother, they must be thwarted—brought down in utter confusion!"

"A move in that direction brings me here, sir. We need your aid. Will you assist?"

"Yea, verily! You may command my very life, brother!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

IN SECRET RETREAT.

An hour before sundown, Orthodox and British Bill, both disguised as hunters, rode out of Crystal City and galloped down the Gilt Edge trail to the valley in which was located the dugout of the Outlaw Miners.

A pronounced coolness had sprung up between the two scoundrels, and but few words were wasted during the trip.

Arrived at the dugout, they masked their faces, dismounted, and entered, while one of the outlaws led their horses away to the cave under the bluff.

Both men were warmly greeted by the ruffians assembled at the rendezvous. British Bill sat down among them, but Orthodox, exchanging a few words with Black Jack, passed on to the rear of the dugout, where he lifted a section of the dingy canvas with which the walls of earth and clay-chinked logs were draped.

In the gloom, naught but the straight, high bank of clay was discernible behind that curtain; but had one possessed a lantern or a lamp, or even a candle, the crevices outlining a large door would have been distinctly visible.

A vigorous push upon this cunningly hidden door sent it back upon its hinges. Then Orthodox strode forward; the curtain fell into place, and the door noiselessly closed.

The plotter found himself in a natural corridor, high enough and wide enough to admit a horse and rider, and a few paces further on he came to a large, dry cavern, lighted by a huge fire, crackling and snapping near the center of the rough stone floor.

Around this fire were a number of men, and as Orthodox approached all sprang up.

"Wal, chief, ye aire hyar, I sees, accordin' ter program," the foremost greeted.

"Yes, Bendabuck, and glad I am to be here, too. But the captives—how are they?"

"Fine es silk, boss, barrin' a bit o' frettin' an' fumin'."

"We split 'em apart, ter keep their speerits down, an', save ther gals, no two's in a place."

"That was right. But where are the girls? I would see them first."

"Straight ahead, boss, in yen dark corner."

Nodding curtly, Orthodox strode forward and entered the gloomy alcove in which were confined the two maidens, Mona Yorke and Mignon Verne.

Both girls started at his approach, and a sparkle of wrathful contempt appeared in Mignon's dark eyes.

"Oh! it is you, is it, William Weep," she exclaimed.

"Yes, dear girl, 'tis I. Do you bid me welcome?"

"Welcome—you? Ugly beast!"

"Slowly, sweet Mignon! Don't get gry now, nor anger me. This night the parson makes us husband and wife, 'twill ill become us to appear before a holy man with frowning faces."

"Meaning—just what, sir?"

"My words were clear!"

"Would you dare—"

"Force you into marriage? Yes, angel! And why not? Aside from the love I bear you, it is a charitable act to say the least! You are alone in the world, now. Your father has disappeared, your lover is in the shadow of a graceful death, and—"

"Silence! Odious brute! I will listen!"

"As you please, dear Mignon! you'll change your tune, I'll warrant both you and your pretty mate go to altar this night, and I warn you here and now, that if you create as you'll rue it!"

A mocking laugh, a ceremonious bow, and the plotter turning away, stalked across the cavern to where lay Ad Yorke, securely bound.

Removing his mask, he sat down beside the helpless Sharp, and spurned with his foot.

"Dog, how goes it?"

Silence.

"Ah! you sulk, do you? Well, move your tongue to words—to vain pleading, before this night ends."

"Know ye that the peerless Mignon she whom you love so well, is here helpless, in my power?"

"Devil! Scoundrel—"

"Don't choke, man, nor glare at me so furiously! And spare your threats, for every one shall be returned thousandfold ere your blood runs a drop by drop, over these cold stones."

"Loose my hands, Donald Craigie! Free me one minute—"

"Not for worlds, dear boy! But, wrong me. I am not a Craigie. Not a drop of that accursed blood flows in my veins. I am a Gypsy, bred and born."

"But steady, now, and listen. Time for the mask to fall—for you to show cunningly you have been entrapped. Longer delay would rob revenge of its sting!"

"Revenge for—what?"

"For standing in my path—for robbing the love of yon sweet maiden, smug-faced bootlick! I hate you, Ad Yorke—hate you as Satan does a sinner. I've sworn to rack your heart with sorrow, then to slay you!"

"You, the son of Edwin Craigie, lieve me to be the son of Ishmael Craigie. But I am not. Ishmael Craigie turned his back to the people who given him a mother. He wronged them—wronged them most bitterly, and in revenge his infant son was stolen abandoned, and I, a Gypsy, put in place."

"Ishmael's wife was a French lady, sister of Ivan Verne. Some years after her death he married again—this his dead wife's younger sister. Of that union a daughter was born, and that daughter is known as Mignon Verne."

"Impossible!"

"Nay, thou graceless whelp! 'Tis though but three people in the new world know it—myself, Ivan Verne, and half-crazed father, Ishmael Craigie!"

"But why—"

"Ishmael had learned to dread vengeance. A suspicion that his had been stolen and a Gypsy infant substituted had crept into his heart. Deceiving a like fate for Mignon, he gave into her uncle's keeping, even concealing the fact of her birth, so far as possible."

"Now, Adrain Yorke, you know I am determined to wed Mignon Verne. Aside from the love I bear her, such union is imperative if I would clinch my grip on the Craigie estate."

"I tell you plainly that I came here to secure old Donald Craigie's will, and

had been found, or to remove you, your sister, and your father from my path. I intended to work secretly, to blot out your lives quickly and painlessly, if need be; but you crossed my path, and I swore a bitter, black revenge.

"We sounded Ishmael's agents. McGowan sold out readily, but Darius Collins proved incorruptible. We suspected—nay, believed—he had the will in his possession, or documents which would disclose its whereabouts, and it was determined to do away with him.

"Here was the chance to bring such ignominy upon you that Mignon would turn from you in scorn and loathing, and we laid the plot most carefully. Disguised to resemble you, I went to the telegraph office one night with McGowan, and talked of the crime, as if striving to hit upon some plan by which it might be committed without risk of detection. Two men were in hiding, listening, and they, completely deceived, were ready to swear your life away.

"Fate played in with us the morning you cast the pewter balls, and we took prompt advantage of that incident, and turned it against you. When we had captured you, McGowan donned your clothing, boots and all, and rode your horse to the scene of the crime. One shot did the work, and on his return to the spot where I was in hiding, I drew a pewter ball from the weapon, substituting a leaden one, then with my duplicate key went to the office that night and put the pewter bullet in a pasteboard box in your table drawer, where it was found by Marshal Tarbutton.

"You placed the money for the stolen map—which, by the way, I possess—in British Bill's hands, and when it was returned to you it had been marked with blood from a vein in my arm, and again were you duped.

"We had plotted most carefully, and all things promised well. Before the sport, Shadrach Mason, took a hand in the case there was but one point to give us uneasiness. McGowan, while rifling his victim's pockets, had been driven from his task by a step in the undergrowth, followed by a glimpse of a wild and haggard face. He felt that he was in danger, and determined to flee, but was killed before your very eyes."

A long breath of relief escape the captive Sharp. Near as he was to death at that moment, it carried a weight from his heart to learn the truth of that dread tangle.

"And the locket?" he muttered. "McGowan threw—"

"Of course, you fool! Better, though, had we left it alone, for that cursed sport found links from the chain in McGowan's pocket. That, and the presence near of Ishmael Craigie, in the guise of Ajah, the Seer, caused us to change our plan, or I'll warrant you'd stretch hemp according to law ere long.

"But it was a pretty plot—as pretty as ever evolved by Gypsy cunning, and my only regret is that we cannot wait and see it work out to the end.

"You are doomed to suffer, however. Before your eyes to-night I'll wed your precious half cousin, Mignon Verne Craigie, while your white-faced sister shall find a mate, then and there, in gallant British Bill, my Gypsy pard, as they say out here.

"When that is done, your life ends. So, console yourself with the thought that your misery is to be shortlived!"

And with a brutal kick at that prostrate form, Orthodox arose and stalked away, his sunken black eyes glittering balefully in the flickering firelight.

Then a dark head protruded from behind a boulder hard by, and in cautious strains came the words:

"Hist, pard! Brace up! I heard all, and if we win free once more we'll hang that Gypsy galoot mountain high."

"Pawnee!"

"You bet! But—softly now! I've got my hands free, and as soon as I get the ropes off my ankles I'll come to you and cut you loose. Then we'll hunt a way

out of this hole, get your dad and the girls, and skip."

"If we can only do it!"

"Rest easy! If we fail, there'll be two dead Gypsies when the gang next counts noses," and with the words Pawnee Bill free once more, crept silently around the boulder.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE PLOTTERS. CONFOUNDED.

Absalom Vettters found the lamp turned low in Camp-Meeting Tom's cabin when he pushed open the door and stepped inside, shortly after nightfall.

Just in time, too, was the Gypsies' emissary to catch the worthy parson with demijohn and glass in hand, and a grin of delight came over his sharp features as he noted Tom's apparent confusion.

"Ah-hah, pard parson!" he chuckled. "I'm much afeard ye're fallin' inter ther ways o' ther ungodly ye preach erbout!"

"As a tonic, brother—as a tonic merely!" stiffly. "My health is none too robust, and for the sake of my suffering flock I now imbibe to ward off the ill effects of the long night ride before me.

"To your good health, brother!"

A suggestive gurgle followed. Then the parson put down the bottle and glass, and wiped his lips.

"My beast is in waiting, brother; if you're ready, I'll bring him around, and we'll be off."

"I'm waitin', parson."

"Then, son, we'll move at once," and Camp-Meeting Tom passed quickly from the cabin to secure his horse.

Moving forward, Vettters seized the demijohn, drew the cork, and smelled of the contents.

"Liquor—prime ole liquor, or I'm no judge!"

"Wal, parson, hyar's ter your health, now, fer I dreads ager myself!" and tilting the bottle to his lips, the outlaw proceeded to appease his chronic thirst. "A rum ole coon ye aire, parson, ha! ha!"

A moment later Tom, leaving his horse at the door, re-entered the cabin.

"Now, brother, for our stomach's sake we'll imbibe just once, drinking to the health of the bride to be, then mount and away."

Needless to say, Vettters made no objection. Tom filled two glasses, and both men seemed to drink; but had the outlaw noticed closely, he would have seen that the parson's liquor, instead of passing into his mouth, was deftly emptied into his sleeve!

Then Tom seized a bulky carpetbag and crammed in the demijohn, saying:

"We may be seized with cramps, brother, for the air is quite chill to-night, and it will be well to be provided for such an emergency."

A significant wink accompanied this speech, setting the outlaw into a roar of laughter. Rallying, he slapped the parson on the back.

"Ye're a brick, Tom—yas, a reg'lar sun-burned brick, an' ef I'd known ye was sech a hearty, whole-souled galoot, I'd 'a' bin ter seen ye long ago! But, come—let's off, or my gal will think I've run away. An' ther bag, parson—ye don't need tote thet thing along, fer ye'll shore strike chuck a-plenty—"

"Tracts for the heathen, brother. I carry them always, that no chance to spread the good word may be missed. But forward, now, and I'll be with you."

Then Tom extinguished the light, followed Vettters out of the cabin, and closed the door.

A moment later both men mounted and rode away, and within a few minutes reached the Gilt Edge trail, whereupon they set forward at a steady gallop.

Just as they gained the valley in which was the rendezvous, Vettters drew rein, uttering a doleful groan.

"What is it, brother?"

"Oh, parson!—cramps!"

"Verily, this night air is troublesome, for I, too, feel qualms of the inner man. But here is the remedy with which to

allay your pain. And pray make haste, brother, for I myself feel pressing need of medicament."

When the demijohn had been thrust back into the carpetbag, the parson drew a cigar from his pocket, and, after striking many matches, succeeded in lighting it.

"Now, brother, let us forward once more," he requested, with a drunken lurch and hiccough.

But the cigar proved obdurate, and twice on the way up the valley the parson insisted on stopping and relighting it. Had Vettters been less thoroughly under the influence of liquor he might have seen, during the second halt, a light flare up not far away, in answer to Camp-Meeting Tom's signal matches.

Then, just as they drew rein to dismount at the thicket in front of the dugout, the cigar again required attention, and match after match flashed brightly in the gloom. A cricket chirruped near at hand; an owl hooted off to the left, and on the hillside above the dugout a coyote barked.

Throwing aside the cigar with an expression of disgust, the parson stiffly swung himself out of the saddle, and grasped the carpetbag.

"Where's—hic—oush!" he hiccoughed.

"Thish—hic—away, m' bro'er. Leave—his—orses—man—hic—tend t' them." and Vettters reeled blindly into the path, closely followed by his unsteady guest.

In response to a heavy knocking, the dugout door was opened, and the two men, blinking at that transition from darkness to light, reeled into the midst of the outlaws.

A shout of laughter greeted their appearance.

"Drunk as lords, both of them," Orthodox declared to British Bill. "But—it is better so! The donkey won't be so likely to kick when he finds how the land lays."

"True; in disobeying your orders, Vettters has played right into our hands!"

At that moment the parson, with drunken gravity, put down his carpetbag, opened it, and took out the bottle, set it aside, and produced a handful of tracts, which he solemnly distributed among the crowd.

"Come—this way, parson," Orthodox commanded, grasping the reeling man by the arm.

"Yesh, m'f'en'," and with a lurch Tom caught up the bag and accompanied the plotter.

Through the secret door and into the cave he was conducted, while British Bill and several of the men brought up the rear.

Staring at the fire, and blinking stupidly around, by turns, the parson gravely listened while Orthodox explained just what was wanted.

"Zactly!—o' course—hic! Women fools—don't know—hic—own minds, ole boy! 'Pend—hic—on me—I'll see—hic—through. Jes' get—hic—ready—hic—while I 'stibute—hic—tracts. 'Pend on—hic—me, I tell ye, bro'er!"

Then, with a lurch, he was off through the crowd of laughing men, handing out tracts, while the two plotters, well satisfied with his seemingly befuddled condition, drew aside for a moment's conversation.

But the eyes of Parson Tom had not been idle. Winning clear of the outlaws, he struck off across the cavern at that same reeling, staggering gait, tracts in hand, and a moment later stopped beside the captive maidens.

"Oh, sir!" began Mona. "We—"

"Hist! Say no more! Fear not!" Just a whisper, but clear, sharp, and distinct, and both girls felt a strange thrill of hope as they watched that oddly reeling figure stumbling onward.

A moment, then Parson Tom stopped beside Edwin Yorke. A small knife reflected the distant light, and the captive's bonds dropped asunder.

"Wait!" The one word, only! Reaching into his carpetbag, the parson drew forth and

pressed into the hands of the captive a brace of loaded revolvers!

A swift gleam of intelligence flashed from Edwin Yorke's moody eyes, and he glanced quickly at the face of his rescuer. Before he could speak the parson was gone.

Zizzaging, wheeling in seemingly aimless curves and circles, Parson Tom pushed on, watched by many curious eyes, in not one of which was there so much as a hint of suspicion!

Presently, in passing an alcove, he tripped over a pair of outstretched feet, and fell upon his knees.

"You drunken beast!"

Silently the parson pitched forward, fairly hovering over that prostrate form, with gleaming blade in hand.

"Steady, bo! Up with your hands till I slice off the cords!" he breathed.

"Good heavens! You!"

"Sh! No word now. Wait!"

"My hands are free."

Mutely, then, Parson Tom pressed a pair of weapons into the hands of the Telegraph Sharp.

"Leave for Pawnee Bill, too. He is free, but unarmed, behind that boulder."

Then another brace of revolvers was taken from the carpetbag and laid on the rough stone floor.

"Watch me!—back me hard when the word comes!"

"Aye!"

Two of the outlaws, chuckling loudly at the parson's seeming mishap, had started forward to get him on his feet, but he rose in time to meet them.

"Wha's ze masser ze—hic—ouse!" he grumbled, drowsily. "Feel 'er—hic—roll!"

"Ye ain't got yer sea-legs on yit, parson," laughed the nearer, catching him by the arm. "Come! Ye must git ready fer business, now."

True enough! A glance showed that the girls had been dragged from their retreat, and were being forced toward the center of the cave.

Just in time had the daring spy's adroit feat been performed!

Swiftly moving forward, Orthodox at that moment caught the parson by the arm, and shook him roughly.

"Here!—you!" he grated. "Brace up a bit! Botch, bungle, or falter, now, and I'll blow your brains out!"

"Lead on, sir—hic! 'Pend on me, m' bro'er! Know m'—hic business!"

Quickly, then, Orthodox grasped Mignon Verne—British Bill, Mona Yorke, and the group was formed.

Pale with terror, trembling in every fibre, and fearful now that the worst had come, despite that faint ray of hope held out by the parson's words, the maidens seemed more dead than alive, and hearts less calloused than those of the Gypsy plotters would have relented.

"Ready, man! Speak out!" called Orthodox, sharply.

But at that moment a muffled crash of firearms was heard, mingled with the yells and shouts of struggling men.

"To the door, there, men, and hold it!" shouted British Bill, in fierce alarm, and then, as the outlaws bounded away to do his bidding he turned to the parson, and added:

"Speak the words quickly, or—"

A gasp of terror filled that hiatus!

The drunken leer had left that sun-browned face; the drooping eyelids were lifted, and the brilliant hazel orbs flashed with dire ire!

Each slim brown hand gripped a revolver, and the muzzles bore full upon the breasts of the Gypsy plotters!

But, most alarming of all, the visage thus strangely altered was not that of Camp-Meeting Tom, but the stern, dark face of Shadrach, the Sport-Detective!

of William Weeper, and with a peculiar, serpentine movement of his gaunt form he hurled Mignon Verne squarely against the sport, knocking him down.

Then the Gypsy's weapons gleamed in his brown hands, and a yell of fierce triumph rang from his lips.

Before he could fire at his prostrate foe, however, Edwin Yorke, Adrain Yorke, and Pawnee Bill leaped forward, and a ball from the quarter-blood's weapon pierced the swarthy plotter's brain.

British Bill had also drawn a revolver, but ere he could use it the Telegraph Sharp struck him down, mortally wounded.

At that moment the door between the dugout and the cave was hurled inward, and a scene of wild confusion followed, as Sheriff Wilkins and his deputies, headed by Ivan Verne and the gigantic form of Fiddling Dan, swept into the cave.

Surprised and terror-stricken, and disheartened by the loss of their bold and reckless leaders, the Secret Seven and their fellow-outlaws at once threw down their arms and surrendered.

No one of our friends had been seriously injured in that short, sharp duel to the death, nor in the following struggle, and it was with happy hearts that they formed a group aside, and went into lengthy explanations of all that had occurred.

Shadrach, the sport-detective, was the hero of the hour. But he bore his honors modestly, and felt that the bright glances and shy blushes of Mona Yorke were ample recompense, just then, for all the perils attendant upon the bold part he had played in the Telegraph Sharp's tough struggle for life and honor.

Gypsy Roebuck—"British Bill"—had been wounded unto death. Ere dying he made full confession of the atrocious plot against Adrain Yorke, or, properly, Donald Craigie, and in the eyes of all the Telegraph Sharp was completely exonerated.

When Sheriff Wilkins had secured his prisoners, the entire party at once returned to Crystal City, where our friends assembled at the home of Marshal Thomas Tarbutton.

True to his word, Ishmael Craigie was yet alive, and he gave the son and the daughter from whom he had so long been separated tender parental greeting, and, before he died, publicly acknowledged them to be his lawful heirs.

The astonishment of the Yorkes, as we shall continue to call Edwin Arvol Craigie and his family, knew no bounds when they learned that the dashing sport, Shadrach Mason, and the beautiful maiden, Mignon Verne, were really Ishmael Craigie's children. For so jealously had Ivan Verne guarded his secret that not even Adrain Yorke, his ward's betrothed lover, knew the truth concerning the maiden's birth. Even in that trying hour in which the shadows of the dread tangle hung thickest and darkest around the innocent head of the Telegraph Sharp, the cunning old jailer had hidden the truth—even helped to lead away from it when Shadrach, in probing for a motive, formed his conjectures as to Ishmael Craigie's married life. Verne could have thrown much light upon the subject then, but decided not to do so until he found it imperatively necessary, through fear that the full truth, if known, might bring fresh perils around the beautiful girl he had learned to love so well.

In that hour in which Ishmael Craigie lay dying, the breach between himself and his long-absent brother was healed, and when the sleep of death came to the eyes of the moribund, it found a contented smile upon his face—peace within his heart.

The Secret Seven and the Outlaw Miners were duly brought to trial, and punished by law. Then such an era of safety and quiet came upon Crystal City that

Marshal Tarbutton reconsidered his once-expressed determination to "resign."

The Lost Mine, so fortunately rediscovered by Pawnee Bill, was promptly patented, and now gives employment to a large number of men, prominent among whom are Dandy Blake and Fiddling Dan and his musical pards.

But Pawnee himself lives the life of a rover, kept from want by his income from the mine.

The Telegraph Sharp promptly claimed his bride, the beautiful Mignon. Their wedding tour carried them abroad, whether they were accompanied by the groom's father and sister, the Sport-Detective, Ivan, and Duncan Saunders, who had possession of Ishmael Craigie's will.

While in England, the estates of Craigie and Craglands were disposed of, and a satisfactory division of the proceeds made—a proceeding hardly necessary, by the way, for a double link between the families had been welded when, in Craigie Hall, Donald Craigie—"Shadrach Mason"—espoused the fair Mona.

A year of traveling, of sight-seeing in distant lands, then all sailed westward, to build their homes in the land of their choice—"America, the land of the free, the home of the brave."

THE END.

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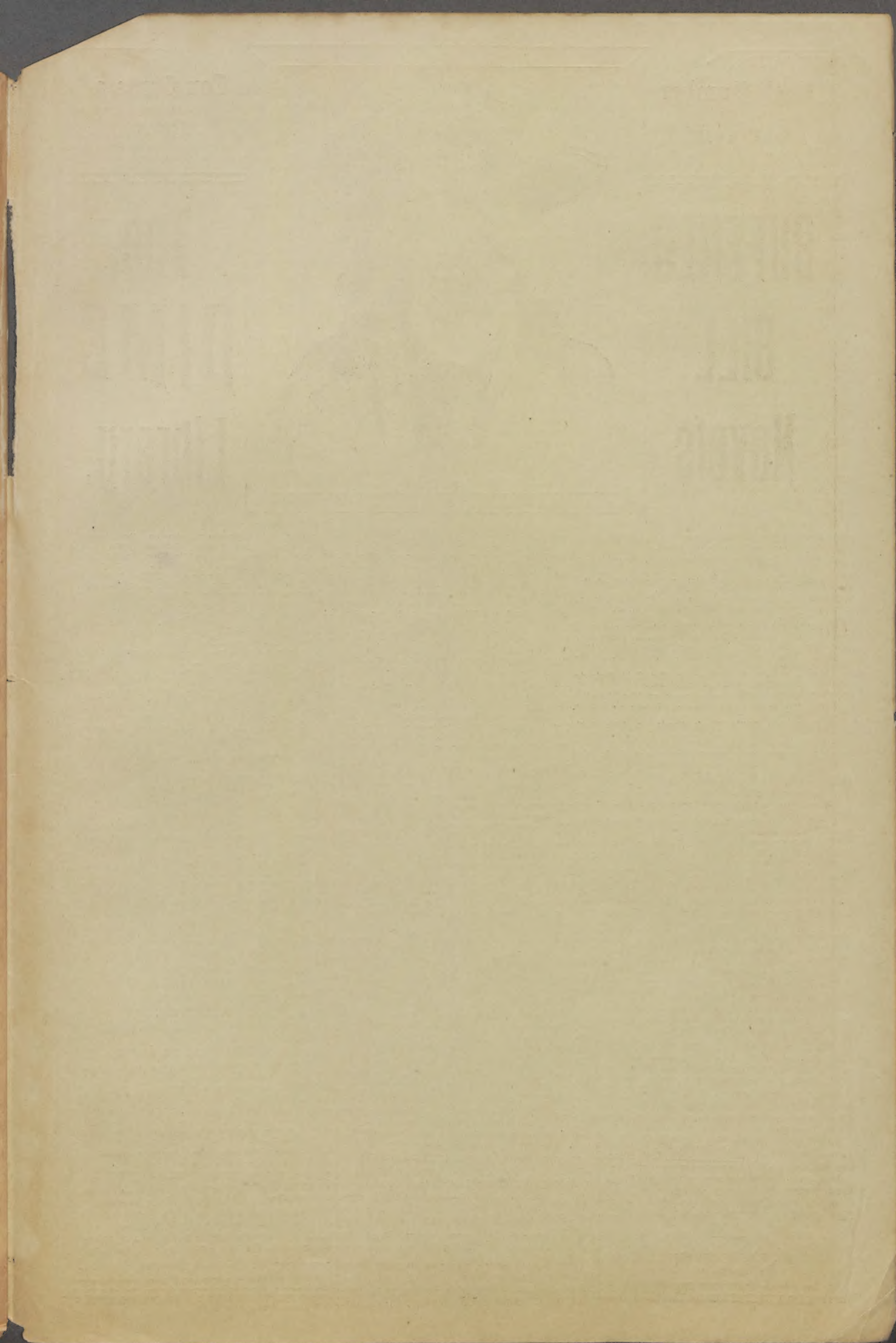
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CHAPTER XXXVIII.

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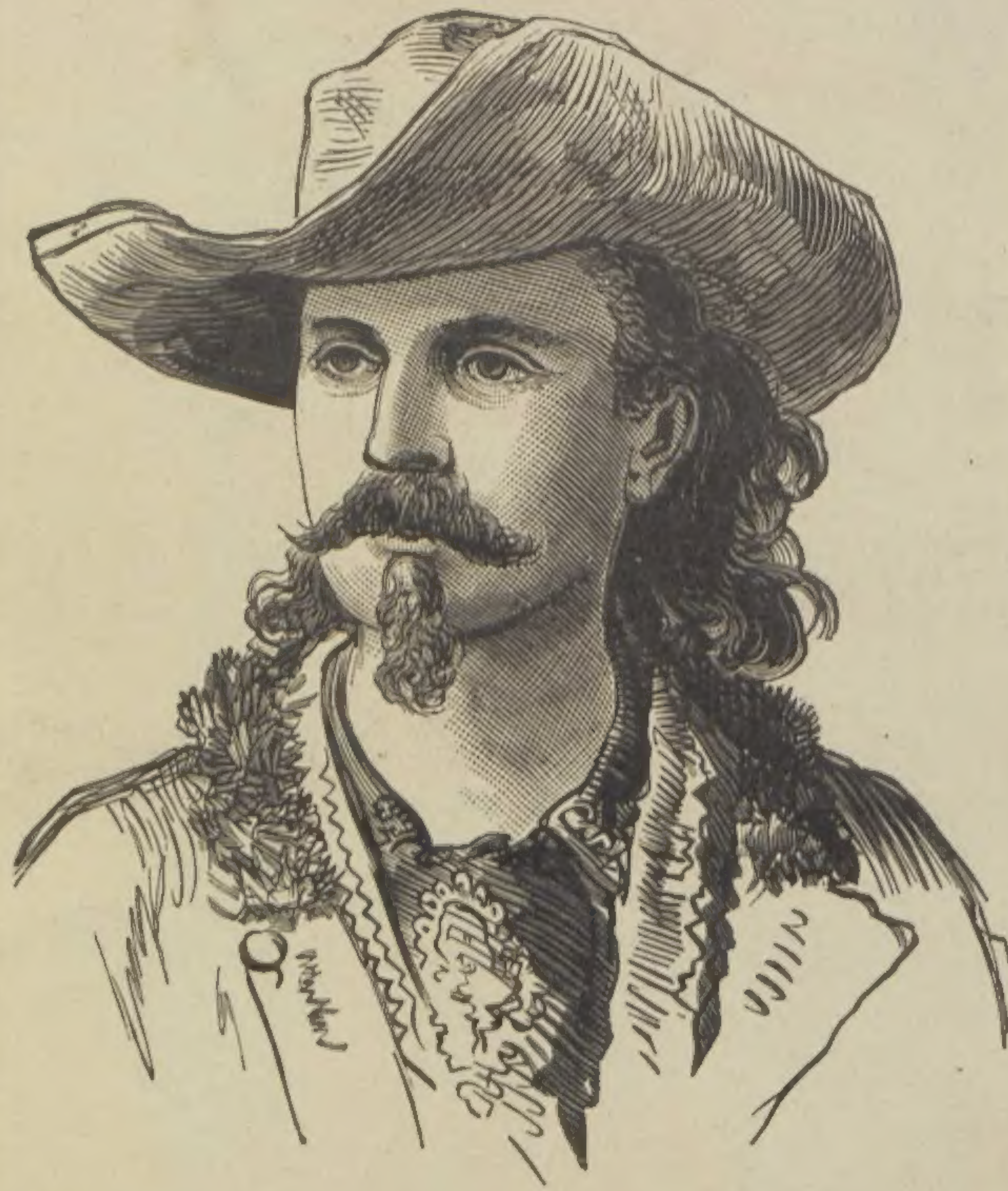
As he noted that startling change, a terrible oath flashed across the livid lips



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